

THE BACKBENCHERS

THE MISSED CALL!



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Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I think see knows my name

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Chapter 1

The Ex-Head Girl

She looked out of the glass windows of The Presidency Convent, bored by the stupid lecture going on in class. Why do the teachers have to blabber so much? It just makes their throats sore and the students' heads ache. So, what's the use? She never liked attending classes. And especially Maths. It was one subject, and mind you, the only subject she was clueless about. And for the same reason, the school authorities thought that the twelfth -graders needed extra classes for it. So there they were, in one of those continuous, intolerable lectures. She wrinkled her nose in irritation and let out a long sigh of frustration.

Natasha was usually not that annoyed by things around her. Like, for example, Saakshi and Priya exchanging silly looks and giggling silently next to her. She could usually just ignore all that and carry on with her life, unfazed. But that day, she was especially irritated. And she knew why.

It had been happening since the whole previous month. And she still had so many questions unanswered. How? How did all of that happen? How did she end up being where she was then? Kicked off from her post as the Head Girl of her school-The Presidency Convent. Dumped by her boyfriend. Thrown out of the Debating Club. Almost expelled from the school, even ...

How did all that happen? One day, she was the most envied girl of her school, and the next-DISCIPLINARY ACTION and being kicked out ... almost.

As she looked out of the window, she noticed familiar faces. Ananya, her sworn enemy and the girl who had just joined school a few months back. Yuvraj-her exboyfriend-who was now dating Ananya. No, she did not feel envy. She just felt fury. Even though she had dated Yuvraj for quite a while, Natasha had never had any real feelings for him. It was convenient for her to date him. Yuvraj-the intelligent debating team captain; Natashathe alluring Head Girl. It was a match made in heaven. Not for long.

Before Ananya came to The Presidency Convent, Natasha had ruled the school and

everyone in it, students and teachers alike. There was no student-boy or girl-who had the courage to stand up against anything she said or did.

The guys were too busy staring at her strawberry lips and lustrous legs. The girls were too busy taking notes; she was every girl's idol figure. No one walked or talked or did anything, actually, the way she did. Not even close. Everyone was in awe of her till Ananya spoiled it all.

Ananya-the sweet, soft-spoken, timid, small town girl from Raipur. In the beginning, no one even noticed her. And when they did, it was only to make fun of her. Her long skirt, her oiled and tightly tied hair, her face devoid of make-up ... all that did not go down too well with the posh environment of The Presidency Convent. The place stank of money. Every student had a rich and wellconnected dad. Ananya was a misfit. She wasn't rich, nor was her father connected.

One week of being ignored, ridiculed and labelled as an 'outcast' was all she could take. Then, she just had to be noticed. The shorter skirt, the tighter shirt, the stylishly cut hair served their purpose perfectly. Even the way she walked and talked ... everything changed. Suddenly, she was everybody's baby. Everyone loved her. Within days, she was the talk of the school. And slowly, the new Ms Popular took over everything that was rightfully Natasha's. She stole her limelight, and her boyfriend, Yuvraj. As Natasha looked at them outside the window of her classroom, she felt only one feeling-fury. She swore she would make Ananya pay.

'Natasha Malhotra? Are you with us?' Mr Sharma's loud voice broke through her train of thoughts. She had almost forgotten where she was-in the middle of a class, with a lecture going on.

'Huh?' she said.

'So we finally have your attention? Do you mind standing up when I'm talking to you?'

Natasha got up stiffly.

'Now speak up!' Mr Sharma said.

'Could you please repeat the question, sir?' Natasha said with clenched teeth, mocking.

'What is the next step?'

She looked at the board. There were numbers and symbols written all over it with a blue marker, in a clean handwriting. She looked at the last step of the question Mr Sharma was discussing. It had weird mathematical calculations she knew nothing about. But she did recognise the integration symbol somewhere.

'We integrate the last equation,' she said the first thing that came to her mind.

'Why? Didn't we already do that one step back?' Mr Sharma looked at her, with a puzzled look on his face.

'I, uh, because ...'

'Yes?'

'I don't know,' she said meekly. She could already hear snickers from the back benches.

'Thank you for the extremely insightful comment, Natasha. We'll let you integrate. The rest of us would differentiate equation 5, and ...' Mr Sharma continued teaching.

'Bloody bastard,' Natasha whispered under her breath.

'Excuse me?' Mr Sharma turned around and thundered. 'Did you say something to me?'

She looked at him and gauged his anger. She could not afford to piss off a teacher. It had taken a lot of cajoling and pleading-plus a hefty donation, of course-from her dad to keep her in the school. She was categorically asked to keep away from incidents like this. Even a small case of misconduct could get her thrown out of the school. Mr Sharma-one of many helpless teachers of the school who wouldn't dare scold a rich man's kid-knew this and enjoyed the moment.

'You were saying ... ?' Mr Sharma prodded again.

'Nothing, sir.'

'Good. Now concentrate, unless you want another merit to your already golden name,' he snickered at his own joke and turned around.

Natasha sat down slowly in her place, with her cheeks burning. She had never been insulted like that before. At that moment, she felt like tearing the old bastard's head apart.

'Tch, tch. How times change,' she heard someone say from behind.

'Aww. Poor baby!' came another girl's comment.

She knew that would happen. It was not the first time. Everyone hits people when they are down. The world is full of sadists. She let out a frustrated breath and decided to ignore the jibes.

'Dumb blonde,' another voice joined in.

'Beauty with brains is nothing more than a myth. Do we need to state an example?' someone said and everybody started to laugh.

Natasha looked around angrily. She couldn't take it anymore. There was a limit to the amount of bullshit she would put up with from anyone and this was it. And seeing Saakshi smile didn't do any good to her anger either. She was seething. Why do girls never understand the simple concept of loyalty? Saakshi was supposed to be her friend. So why was she laughing at her with the others?

'Watch it, bitch,' she turned to Saakshi and said.

Excuse me?' Saakshi said, looking offended.

'You're messing with the wrong girl.'

'Oh, yes? And why is that?'

'You know me. Don't get on my wrong side. Or-,' Natasha threatened.

'Or else, what? What would you do?'

'I-'

'Actually, the question is-what can you do?' Saakshi mocked.

And this time, when everyone laughed, it continued for the longest time. More jibes followed, only harsher than before. She chose to keep silent. They took advantage of her

silence. One girl against forty odd people was not a fair game. She had enough sense not to get into all that. Throughout the lecture, she just sat there, listening to all the cruel things people had to say about her. Teenage girls can be unbelievably evil. You won't believe the kind of things they can say. And they call me evil?

As Natasha sat there and listened to everything they said, she realised what it was like to be treated like shit. She had always been the one inflicting pain. Now, when she had a taste of her own medicine, she realised how it was to be on the other side of the fence. She remembered every single voice and what they said. They had no idea what they were getting into. She would make them pay back.

Just because she could not do anything at that moment did not mean she would take all the bullshit calmly. She would not. She would recover, and then they would see. Never hurt a wounded lioness. When her wounds are healed, she won't show mercy. They would see.



Rana had not been able to concentrate on the squash match. The tournament was in a few days and he was his school's, The Bishop Boys' best bet. But he couldn't stop thinking about Natasha. It had been a few days since their break up and he was still not over her. He knew Natasha had only used him to get back at Yuvraj, but he still couldn't help thinking about that gorgeous face.

'Still thinking about her?' his squash partner, Rishab asked.

'Yes,' Rana said.

'You better stay away from her,' he advised. 'You know that she was dating you just so that she could get back at Yuvraj, right? I should have never made the two of you meet. You did the right thing.'

'I know,' Rana said and his mind went back to those days.

'Natasha can never love anybody. I don't think she ever loved Yuvraj either.'

'Can we not talk about her?' Rana said and resumed the match.

Yuvraj and Natasha were a very popular item in The Presidency College-a perfect couple. But an old friend of Rana's, Rishab, who had taken a transfer to The Presidency College from The Bishop Boys' for a few days, made him meet Natasha, the girl with candy lips and the longest legs.

Natasha and Rana had gotten drunk and had made out at Rana's place. Natasha felt guilty about it, but ended up kissing him again on another day.

Yuvraj had walked in on the two of them when they were kissing and Natasha had been royally dumped. Natasha had never been dumped before. Natasha, furious and angry, asked Rana to get Yuvraj beaten up. Rana would have done that but Rishab knocked some sense into his head. He told Rana that Natasha was a vindictive bitch and that there was no need for him to interfere.

When Rana went to fight Yuvraj, Rishab had already alerted the authorities beforehand about a fight that was going to happen. The fight-between the boys from the The Bishop Boys' School and Yuvraj-had to be stopped and Natasha's involvement in the whole incident became clear. She was stripped of her position in the students' council. Yuvraj, too, had to lose his captaincy of the debating team for a while.

After the fight, it was clear to him that Natasha neither liked nor loved him. But he was far from satisfied with that. He wanted to ask Natasha as to why she hadn't told him about Yuvraj when they had first kissed.

His thoughts still in the past, Rana missed another point. The ball whizzed right by his head and he couldn't connect the racquet with it. He was way too distracted. He knew she didn't love him, and neither did he. Or did he? As he served another point, he decided to steel himself and believe in what everyone said about her.

Natasha is a bitch.

Chapter 2

Leave Me Alone

That evening, when Natasha got home, all she wanted to do was forget about the world and go to sleep. She threw her bag away and collapsed face down on her bed. She let out a sigh. No, she did not cry. She was not one of those girls who cried at everything. If they are happy, they cry. If they are sad, they cry. It took a lot more than a little teasing at school to break her. Though, this was more than just a little harmless teasing. They were inflicting pain intentionally. But, she thought, she was not that weak.

Her phone rang and she checked the display. Dad calling.

'Hey Dad,' she took the call and said.

'Natasha? Where are you? Are you okay?' she heard her dad's frantic voice question from the other end.

'Yes, Dad. I'm okay. And I'm at home. Why do you sound so tensed?'

'I tried calling you before so many times, but could not get through. I had no idea where you were.'

'Oh. Actually, I went to the dance class straight from school. Just got back,' she said.

'Couldn't you at least let someone at home know?'

'I'm sorry, Dad. I'll take care the next time,' she apologized almost automatically. She loved her dad. He was the only person in the world who loved her just the way she was, without any judgement whatsoever. She was after all, a photocopy of him-ambitious, ruthless and very effective.

'It's okay. Anyway, I called to tell you about dinner. Be ready by eight. We are-'

'Dad, please. You know I don't want to go,' Natasha injected before he could finish. She knew what it was all about. She knew she was hurting her dad, but there was no other way to it. She simply could not go. Over the last few years, she had developed a hatred for her mom.

'Listen, Natasha, you do not have a choice. It's her birthday today and I want to make it special for her. We are not doing anything fancy. Just dinner for the three of us. The least you can do is to be there,' her dad said sternly.

'But I don't want to be there. I want to go to sleep. I'm tired.'

'I don't want any excuses. I'm just asking you to get dressed and spend a couple of hours with us. Is that too much for you? Could you not give me that?'

'But Dad, I don't want to do anything right now. It has been a really terrible day. Just the thought of getting up and getting dressed ... Please Dad, I can't,' she tried to plead.

'Listen to yourself. It is your mother's birthday and all we are asking of you is to spend a couple of hours with us. But all you want to do is sleep?'

'You don't know how it is at school. I-'

'Stop it, Natasha. I don't want to listen to anything at all. This is happening. You have no other option,' her dad said.

'She doesn't even want me there.'

'Of course she wants you there! You're her daughter. She loves you.'

'Is that why she left? I don't care if it's her birthday. I'm not coming,' she sighed.

'This is not a request. It's a command. I want you ready by eight. We'll leave home together,' her dad announced.

She stayed silent. She knew this was a lost battle. She could never win an argument with her dad.

'Is that clear?' her dad asked.

'Yes,' she said softly and hung up.

She threw her phone aside and collapsed onto her bed. She closed her eyes and tried to pretend the whole day had been nothing but a dream. That she did not have to get ready and go out to some fancy restaurant and spend a hellish couple of hours with her loving mother to celebrate her birthday.



An hour later, she found herself entering the Taj, with her father walking alongside. She loved the place. There was nothing not to love. Maybe she would just have her dinner silently and get it over and done with. She hoped her precious mom was not in a chatty mood. That would be a real pain.

She let out a breath as she entered the hotel. The waiter receiving them smiled at her. She glared back. Somehow, she just knew that the night was going to be a disaster. They were shown to their table and she was relieved to see that her mother was not there yet. Maybe she would not come. Maybe she would have to cancel at the last minute. Or there might be an accident ... Her wishful thinking met a cruel end when she saw her dad get up from his seat. She followed his line of sight to see her mother make her way towards them. She half-heartedly stood up too.

'Happy birthday,' she heard her dad whisper as he hugged her mother.

'Thank you so much. This means a lot,' her mother replied and turned to look at Natasha. 'I am so glad you came.'

'Yeah, right,' she mocked.

'Natasha. Behave,' her dad said sternly.

There was a moment of awkward silence. After that, Natasha turned to her mother and said, 'Happy birthday ...Mom.'

'Thanks, beta,' her mother replied, choosing to ignore her mocking 'Mom.'

They all took seats and placed their orders. There was an awkward silence at the table again. No one knew what to say. Natasha did not mind. She was not in a mood for a conversation anyway. Her luck didn't last.

'So, how is school?' her mother asked.

'Cool,' she replied shortly.

'Studies going well? I heard you have exams coming? Are you prepared?'

'It's just a stupid class test,' she shrugged.

'Oh, okay.'

Silence again.

'You were saying you had a bad day at school today? Do you want to talk about it?' her dad asked to make conversation. Awesome selection of topic. Why could they not have discussed the weather instead?

'It's nothing,' she murmured.

'No, tell me. It's okay. Maybe I could help?' her dad insisted.

'Yes. We are your parents. You can share your problems with us . . .' her mother added.

'It's nothing,' Natasha repeated.

'Come on, kiddo. Maybe we could just help you deal with it a little?' her dad suggested.

'Exactly. Is it something we should be concerned about?' her mother insisted, too, with a worried look on her face.

Natasha stared at the two of them wordlessly. Why were they trying this hard to make this work? They almost seemed desperate for her approval of her mother. Natasha could never-no, would never-forgive her mother.

'Seriously. Quit it,' she said and turned to her food. The last thing she wanted was to discuss her school issues with her mother. Maybe she would have liked talking to her dad about it. Or for that matter, absolutely anyone else.

The rest of the dinner went uneventfully. Natasha just sat silently and concentrated on her food. The only times when she spoke were when questions were directed specifically towards her. She replied in monosyllables. Three words max. She did not even look up from her food all that much. She ate quietly. When it was finally time to leave, the worst happened. Just when she was congratulating herself for coming out of the battle unscarred, her mother turned to her.

'Would you like to do something together? The two of us?' she asked.

Excuse me?' Natasha said in shock, disappointed that she had not made her hatred towards her mother very clear.

Anything you want ... just so we can spend some time with each other ...'

'I don't have time,' Natasha whispered under her breath.

'I am not asking for much. Just a movie or something, maybe ... Whatever you say,' her mother tried again.

'Why would I want to watch a movie with you? Or do anything at all with you?' Natasha said, finally letting go of all the frustration from the day.

'Natasha! Stop it. Is this the way you talk to your mother? Apologize,' her father said.

'No! I won't. Why would I? I did not lie. I just said what I feel. I do not want to have anything to do with her.'

'Natasha-'

'No, Dad. I will not listen to you anymore. I came here for you. Not for her. She should know that,' Natasha said and rushed out of the hotel.

As she sat in the car and waited for her dad to come, she tried to calm herself. What had gotten into her!?! She should not have shouted at her mother like that. Especially not on her birthday. Another ten minutes and she wouldn't have had to see her for another month. She should have just let her be.

Her dad got into the car and drove them back to the house without saying a word. It killed her. She knew he had wanted the night to be special for her mother. And she had tried. But she just could not stand her mother trying to make her way back into their lives. She hated her. For what she had done to her and her dad.

She sneaked a look at him. He wore an unreadable expression. She could tell that he was angry, but she did not know how much. She wanted to make it okay. Her dad was the only person on earth who did not totally hate her. She couldn't afford to lose that. She tried, but no words came out of her mouth. She kept framing and reframing sentences in her head, to apologize for what she had done. But she couldn't say anything. For a

minute, she felt intense sadness. What if he did not forgive her? As she stepped out of the car, she did not look at her dad again. She made her way to her room and without changing out of her dress, climbed onto her bed. She hid herself under the covers and revelled in the darkness.

It was around half an hour later that she heard movement in her room. She peeked out of her blanket to see her dad enter. He came towards her and sat on the side of her bed. She felt relieved. Everything was going to be okay, she knew. He said nothing. She knew she had to be the one to do the talking. So she slowly sat up against the headrest and looked at him.

'Dad ... you know I did not mean to ... I just ... I am really sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. I know I should not have said all those things to her,' she said.

'Then why did you?' His voice was soft, but firm. He did not seem angry. That gave her confidence.

'You know I don't like her. You should never have made me meet her. I ruined the evening for all of us ...'

'I know you don't like her. But ... she really wanted us to have dinner together. She is trying to get things back in place-'

'No, she is not. I know she does not want to make things right. Or maybe . . . maybe she does, for some selfish motive she has . . .' Natasha said with a lot of emotion.

'I have known her since the last twenty years. Trust me, it is time enough to judge the kind of person someone is.'

'But you don't. Can't you see the fakeness behind her words? How artificial everything she says or does is?'

'No, I do not. I consider myself a good judge of character. You see all that because you have chosen to see so. Give her some time,' her dad said calmly.

'No, I cannot do that! It makes no sense. Why would someone leave someone only to come back? All these years later?'

'Because she loves us. She made a mistake and she is trying to set things right now.'

Why not just give her a chance?'

'Because I can't! I cannot show sympathy . . . or compassion . . . or whatever you want to call it. I am just a bad person,' she said, now frustrated.

'Yes, you can. You don't know it, but you are a very good person at heart.'

'No, I am not. You don't know anything. You should have seen the way they treated me at school today ... and they do that every day ... No one does that to a good person.'

'They are all foolish. They cannot see what a gem of a person-' her dad started but she cut him off.

'Oh, please Dad. I know what I am. And they know that. I deserve all that I am getting . . .'

 she said dejected.

They stayed silent for a short while, after which her dad said, 'Do you want to talk about it?'

She shook her head.

'Okay. Just know that I am there. And I am willing to listen, okay?'

She nodded.

Alright. Now go to sleep, it's getting late. You have school tomorrow,' he said and kissed her forehead softly.

'Hmm.'

And ... I know it's too much to ask of you, but at least try to accept your mom. What is wrong in trying, right?'

And even though she nodded, she knew she would never even consider accepting her mom back.

Chapter 3

No Answer

Fifteen missed calls in fifteen minutes. Rana did not even bother rejecting them. He let it ring, over and over again. She never gave up. The calls continued. She knew he was not going to make it any easier for her. She had been mean to him and she deserved all she was getting. While breaking up, Rana had told her exactly how he felt knowing that she had used him and that he never wanted to talk to her again.

As Natasha called Rana for the millionth time that morning, she felt her hopes waver a little. It had been over an hour. He had not even rejected a single call from her. But Natasha was out of options.

After that row at school, there was no one she could talk to. Saakshi used to be a friend, but she was a bitch, too, and bitches don't change. Natasha needed company quite desperately. And Rana ... she really wanted to set things right with him. She looked at his number and she found her head muddled with questions. Do I like him? She had never really cared about hurting anyone and setting it right, but why was it different this time? Natasha was further troubled by why Rana had decided to dump her, even after getting into a fist fight with Yuvraj over her.

After calling him consistently for over an hour, she let out a huge sigh of frustration.

She sat on her bed and decided to go to Rana's place and talk it out with him. And with that thought in her mind, she went to take a shower. Half an hour later, she checked her reflection in the mirror for one last time. She had taken special care dressing up. High heels, hair falling carefully wildly all over, skirt reaching her mid thighs. A little lip gloss, a dash of kohl, and she was ready to go.

A little while later, she found herself sitting in her car, parked right outside Rana's place. She called him again. As expected, the first few calls were rejected. She took a deep breath and slowly released it. She stepped out of the car.

The door was opened almost immediately after she rang the bell. The servant stood a few feet away from her, holding the door open for her to enter. What pissed her was the way he was eyeing her curiously and looking her up and down.

`Kisse milna hail' he asked.

`Where's Rana?' she asked, looking behind him, as if expecting Rana to leap up from behind.

`Who are you?'

`Just answer the stupid question,' she said from behind gritted teeth.

`Could you please tell me your name?'

`Why do I need to tell you my name? Just tell me where Rana is.'

`Are you Natasha Malhotra?' the servant asked. She nodded and the servant continued, `You can't meet him.'

`What the hell! Did Rana ask you to not let me in?' Natasha suddenly thundered, her self-control giving way to fury.

`Please calm down.'

`Rana! RANA!' she started to shout, forcing herself inside the house. She looked in and around and not knowing what to do, started to shout in random directions. `Rana! I know you're in here somewhere. And you know I want to talk to you. Would you just come out please? Would it kill you to- What? Buzz off, man,' she said irritably to the servant, who was trying to ask her to leave.

`Madam-'

`What is wrong with you, you jerk? Can't you mind your own freaking business?' she turned towards him and let out.

`Sorry to interrupt, but it is his business to help you out of the premises,' came a familiar voice from behind them. She spun around to see Rana descending a flight of stairs and to approach her.

`Rana . . .' she managed to murmur stupidly, as she stood and stared at him. Rana looked gorgeous with his floppy mop of hair and his careless smile. Natasha, for a moment, forgave herself for cheating on her boyfriend for him.

'I tried to keep her out, but she did not listen ...' the servant said politely to Rana.

'It's alright. You can go,' Rana replied, not taking his eyes off Natasha's.

Once the servant excused himself, Natasha felt a shiver of fear.

'So?' he said.

She said nothing. She just stared at him wordlessly, looking utterly stupid.

'Natasha? You wanted to say something?' Rana prodded.

'I ... I just, uh, please take me back . . .' It came out before she could stop herself. It sounded stupid and for the first time, she had begged. She looked at Rana with horror ... and saw his expression change.

He stayed silent for a while, and stared right back at her. Her breathing stopped. She looked at him, with a flurry of emotions clearly etched on her face. Fear, regret, guilt, anticipation ... love, maybe. As she waited for him to respond, she thought what she would do if he said no. She would not take no for an answer. She would make him understand . . . though she was not sure what. Natasha was herself not clear in her head as to why she wanted him so much.

'Are you serious? Are you bloody serious?' he said and laughed at it, like it was the funniest thing ever said.

It took her a few seconds to realise what she felt. She felt something prick the back of her eye; she was about to cry. Oh God. No. That would be so humiliating. I won't cry. I won't cry. She kept repeating in her head. Why is this happening? He was just another guy. And lately, she had gotten used to insults. She composed herself and fought back her tears.

'Yes. Yes, I am serious,' she answered him simply, as if she did not understand the question was rhetorical.

'What? Have you like, totally lost it?' Rana said, looking exasperated beyond belief.

'No, Rana. I'm perfectly alright. I want to get back together. I regret what I did to you and I am here to apologize. I want to-'

'Hold on. Why on earth do you think I would be interested in what you want and what you don't?' he cut her off rudely.

'Because I lo-' She stopped herself before she could say the word out loud. Love. 'Because I really want to set things right. I have wronged you. And I've apologized. And I would do it again, if you want me to.'

'Do it.'

'What?'

'Do it. Apologize to me. For everything you have done to me,' Rana said, looking down at her, as if she was roadside trash.

'Rana-I'm sorry. For not telling you that I was dating Yuvraj, and for kissing you. I shouldn't have used you to get back at him. I know it was horrible of me, and I am sorry,' she said. The tears would come anytime now. But she was doing a mighty good job of holding them back.

Rana did not say anything. He looked at her as if he was trying to gauge how much of what she was saying she really meant. Her heart took a little leap. It was not over yet. There was still a chance. He was at least considering.

She continued, 'But Rana . . . I don't regret kissing you. You mean something to me ... and ... Please come back. I need-'

'Okay, that's it.' he suddenly cut her off loudly by interjecting. 'Need. That word always has to turn up, when we are talking about you, doesn't it? You need me. Then you use me. How convenient. You cheated on me when you didn't tell me that you were already dating someone. Then you use me?'

'I really have genuine feelings for-'

'No, Natasha, you don't. For a minute there, seeing you trying this hard ... I almost started to think that you might be telling the truth, for a change, but I know it's all bullshit.'

'Please believe me. I can't ... I can't tell you how much I need you right now. There's no one. . .' she said meekly.

'Go away.'

'What?'

'Go away. Get out of my house. Now,' Rana said and climbed back the flight of stairs, disappearing from her view

'But . . .' she said softly and the rest of the words died in her mouth.

She looked around helplessly for a while, before realising that there was nothing more she could do. She had literally begged, and he had literally kicked her away. She turned around like a zombie, tears blinding her and made her way out of the house. As she approached her car, the driver held the door open for her. She got in and turned to look at the house she had just been thrown out of. She thought of the day she first came there, got drunk and kissed Rana. She wished she had told Rana about Yuvraj.

Chapter 4

She Still Exists?

As she sat silently and looked at Yuvraj in the corridor, their eyes met and it was evident that he knew how she had practically thrown herself at Rana the previous day. Or maybe he didn't. Maybe she was just imagining things. She was surprised to know that she did not regret any of what happened with Rana. And she decided to see what happened with Rana as a first step to gaining his approval and her respect back. Yesterday, he listened to me. Tomorrow, he might be willing to talk.

Her hopes did not flounder. She sat in the class, bored. She had no one to talk to. She hadn't minded before because she had never had any free time. The student council activities had always kept her busy. That day, she realized a change in the classroom's environment. Everyone was talking excitedly to each other. She looked around and tried to figure out what it was all about, but didn't know whom to ask. So she finally paid a little attention to what the teacher was saying.

'... only one team from The Presidency Convent. And so, we have decided to select four teams from the twelfth grade. These teams will compete against each other. This will be the first round. The team that wins it will go to the next round of the quiz, in IIT Delhi. Please put your names on the list I have passed around. We will make teams from it and select which team represents my class. I will make the teams on my discretion, alone,' the teacher concluded.

Her brain rejected the useless information almost by reflex. Quiz? She had better things to do in life. Like, for example-debating, anchoring and organizing events. Over the last few weeks, she had not been allowed to represent the school in any extra-curricular activity but she couldn't be kept out of everything forever. But what if ..

And then she thought again-a quiz? Maybe. It can't be that bad. IIT Delhi was the added charm. She wrote her name on the list and wondered if she would be picked. But almost everyone had opted for selection, so she knew that competition would be tough.

'I will read out the teams now, so you can start preparing,' the teacher said next and started to read out names.

Her daydreams were broken by her name being called out. She looked up, but the teacher had already moved on to the next team. Her name was called out the last in her team, and she missed the names of the other two. She looked around curiously to see who she was put with, but no one seemed to be paying any heed to her.

She decided to wait till the class ended and someone from her team to approach her, to prepare together for the quiz. But what if no one did? What if no one wanted to be on a team with her? The teacher left the class soon, asking the students to use the rest of the time to discuss their strategies with their group members. In a short few seconds, there was a bustle around the class. She looked around to see Shreya make her way towards her. Her heart flipped a little uncomfortably in her chest. This can't be. This can't be. This can't be ...

'Hi,' Shreya said as she stood in front of her.

'Umm ... yes?' Natasha asked unsurely. She was hoping against hope that Shreya was not on her team.

'I ... uh, you want to discuss how we are going to go about this?' Shreya said sweetly, like she always did. Right from the first grade.

'Go about what?'

'The quiz? We are on the same team ...'

'Oh,' Natasha said shortly and silence followed. Of all the people ... Shreya had to be on her team. Shreya. The girl she did not even remember existed ever since they stopped being friends four years ago.

'Natasha? Are you alright?' Shreya asked with concern in her expression.

'Huh? Yeah . . . yeah, I'm okay. Umm . . . so,' she cleared her throat. 'So, who else is in our team,' she asked as casually as possible.

'Vicky-'

'-Rajput? Vicky Rajput? That-' Natasha stopped midway, noticing him come towards them. Vicky was one of the richest and most spoilt guys in the class. Generally, all the students of The Presidency Convent were rich and most of them spoiled, but Vicky was a

degree higher in both. He acted as if he ruled the school. Which he kind of did, too. His dad was on the board of directors and the biggest donor to the school funds. Vicky never shied away from mentioning that.

'That-? What were you saying?' Vicky asked fakeinnocently, turning to Natasha.

'Never mind,' Natasha glared at him.

'No, no. Please go ahead. I would like to know what a girl like you has to say about other people.'

'What do mean a girl like me? What the hell do you mean by that?'

'Showing you your place. That's what I'm trying to do,' Vicky answered furiously.

Before matters got way too out of hand, Shreya intervened and made them both shut up. It took her a good ten minutes and in that time, a lot of new words were added to her slang vocabulary, courtesy Natasha and Vicky. As soon as she managed to stop their bickering, the bell rang and the next period started. She exchanged numbers with both Natasha and Vicky. They would have to have a discussion later. Shreya sighed and made her way back to her seat, asking them to behave themselves when they next met to discuss matters regarding the quiz.

And somehow-to Natasha's intense surprise-she just could not be rude to Shreya.

And she knew why.

Chapter 5

The Good Old Days

Shreya went back home that day and lay back on her bed. Her mom asked why she was late even though she wasn't. Her mom had a habit she had developed ever since that day. That day was the last day Natasha and she had talked as friends.

Natasha and Shreya became friends in the first grade. They joined the same school and bonded instantly. Years went by and they grew up to be different people. Natasha grew up to be an ambitious, brash girl who was rude to anyone who didn't matter, while Shreya remained sweet and an introvert. Yet, Shreya always found comfort in her company and considered Natasha as family.

They were in the eighth grade when the strains in their relationship really started to show. Shreya grew up to be a sweet little girl, with cute dimpled cheeks and a warm smile on her face at all times. Natasha, on the other hand, was a tall, too-skinny, too-fair girl with sharp features and an unpleasant air of arrogance around her. Shreya was loved, while Natasha-still not as womanly and gorgeous as now-was hardly noticed. But Natasha was all Shreya had ever needed. She was family, a sister she had never had.

It took just one day to change everything.

One day, after a sleepover, Shreya had forgot her bag at Natasha's place. In the morning, she had forgotten to take her bag from Natasha's place. Since Shreya was to leave for a family vacation the next day, Natasha deposited the bag in Shreya's school locker. Five days later, when she was back from Shimla, she collected the bag and took it home. Her mom never used to check her bag. But that day, she did, and it changed everything.

What Shreya's mother found changed everything in Shreya's life. Dirty magazines with a lot of illicit pictures. Not one, but six of them. It had been four years and her parents still hadn't got over what they found in her bag. They shut her in her room for a week with a complete silent treatment. Poor things. They hadn't known what to say. Every single day since then had been like jail-time for her. Every move of hers was tracked-where she went, what she did-every single action. Her parents thought she was in bad

company and that it would destroy her life. After all, dirty magazines in an eighth grader's bag was a big deal.

Shreya was broken, for months. She never tried to think of who put them in her bag, and she never suspected Natasha. She knew Natasha ... simply trusted that Natasha would never do something like that to her. Natasha would have no reason to. Soon, everybody in the school knew about the magazines and they started to treat Shreya like an untouchable. Natasha was one of them. She stopped talking to Shreya and pretended she didn't exist anymore.

Until ... one day-about a year after that incident Shreya met her. She was in distress and wanted someone she could talk to.

'Natasha, please believe me. Those magazines were not mine. I don't know what they were doing in my bag. I don't know how this happened. But you have to believe me. Please. You are my only friend. Please trust me.'

'But. . .' Natasha had struggled with words. 'But then, how did they come there?'

'I don't know. But we can find out, right?'

'I ... I don't know, Shreya. I don't think we can find out...'

'Even if we cannot, all that matters to me is you. All I want to know is that you believe me. That I don't disgust you,' Shreya said, peering into Natasha's eyes. 'Do you believe me?'

Natasha shook her head and said, 'I don't think we can ever be friends.' And then she left, leaving Shreya behind in a flood of tears. Shreya lost her only friend. Not only that, she lost her entire social life with her.

For everyone, she was a pervert ... even though almost everyone had an internet connection with the links to almost every free porn site. Nevertheless, she didn't hate the hypocrisy as much as she hated that Natasha wouldn't talk to her. She saw Natasha make new friends, become bitchy, and hang around with people both of them hated. She just watched from a distance, feeling sorry for herself.

She always thought Natasha would eventually come back to her. That never happened. Natasha kept creeping up the social ladder and became the most popular girl

in school. Shreya was left on the side-lines, wanting and wishing the best for Natasha.

What did Shreya know that it was Natasha who had planted the magazines in her bag because she was jealous of the attention Shreya used to get! What did she know!

Chapter 6

Punching Ground

As Natasha made her way to the library, she absentmindedly bumped into some seventh grader and knocked over the notebooks he was carrying. The kid quickly bent down and collected his things together. He apologized repeatedly to her for the collision, which was by no means his fault. She just glared at him and turned away.

She had not met Shreya or Vicky since a week. In fact, she had actually dodged Shreya, in case she brought up the quiz again. She was in no mood to face either Shreya or Vicky again. But when she saw her classmates preparing for the quiz, she felt a pang of... something. She did not know what it was. But she wanted to win. It was something she was used to-winning.

So finally, when she could not put it off any longer, she decided to visit the library and get some useful books, to help her prepare. It was just that she did not know what the quiz was about. General knowledge, maybe. And current affairs. That's what all quizzes are about, aren't they?

That decided, she looked around for a good book on either of them. She found many, and brought a few of them over to a seat and started to flip through them. It was well over an hour when she overheard some students wondering how to split work.

'I'll take wave optics and thermodynamics,' a girl said.

'No, no! I already know thermodynamics. Why don't you do magnetism? And I'll take calculus,' a guy replied. 'Anyway, we have to just read the funny stuff about it. We don't have to get into details.'

That was when Natasha realized that she had been reading all the wrong books. Thermodynamics? Magnetism? Calculus? This is not general knowledge! This is science! These are topics from Physics and Maths.

'Excuse me? Are you guys...' she paused at the semishocked expressions on their faces. '... are you preparing for the quiz?'

'Yes,' the girl replied, a little unsure.

'Can you tell me what topics the questions will be framed from?'

'Science-Physics, Chemistry and Maths.'

'Bloody hell,' Natasha said and got up to replace the books.

They looked visibly shocked. Natasha had never sought help. Or said thank you. Times had changed.



'Can we talk?' she heard Shreya say to her.

'Yes, sure,' Natasha replied, looking up from the book she was pretending to read.

'About the quiz,' Shreya said in a clear voice. 'Have you started with anything?'

'Yeah, I did. I ...' she said and added without thinking, 'I've completed Wave Optics and a few other topics.'

'Oh, great. So you are taking Physics?' Shreya asked, pointing to the book Natasha was reading.

'Physics? As in ... the whole syllabus, you mean?'

'Yeah. I thought it would be easier this way. We could take one subject each, the one we know best,' Shreya said.

'That makes sense.'

'So, I'm taking Mathematics. And since you are interested in Physics, should I ask Vicky to take Chemistry? I mean, just to let him know?'

'Yes. Of course,' I replied.

'Vicky? Vicky!' Shreya called.

'Yeah?' he called back.

'You're cool with taking Chemistry, right?'

'What is she taking?' he asked, looking at Natasha.

'Physics. And I'm taking Maths. So Chemistry is yours,' Shreya said.

'I want Physics.'

'But, she has already completed a topic! Let her do it.'

'No, I want Physics. I've always wanted Physics,' Vicky declared.

Natasha decided to stay out of it and did not say anything to him. He would just provoke her more and they would end up having a verbal battle again. She wanted none of that. She wanted to stay out of making any kind of a scene.

Shreya tried to convince him for a while but he simply would not listen. Natasha did not care. She was yet to start studying any subject. So, she was just about to say Chemistry was okay with her, when Vicky insisted he discuss the matter with her personally. Before she could say anything, she saw him take a few steps toward her. He tilted his head backwards and looked her from top to bottom, as if measuring her up. Then he said, 'Take Physics. What do I get?'

What kind of question is that, Natasha thought. 'Chemistry ... maybe?' she suggested, her voice dripping sarcasm.

'Ha! Hilarious,' Vicky mocked and looked straight in her eyes. 'You know what I mean. What do I get in exchange?'

'What?' Natasha let out, exasperated.

'You made out with Rana to make him get Yuvraj beat up, right? So you-'

'Stop it, Vicky! Have you gone mad?' Shreya said. Natasha just stared.

'You want Yuvraj beaten up, you make out. You want Chemistry ... and I'm giving you that. What do I get?' Vicky said.

'Just stop! Do you have any idea what you are saying?' Shreya said, looking at Vicky

with a shocked expression.

Natasha said nothing. She just slowly stood up, her eyes narrowed in anger and popped on her forehead. Before Vicky could realize, she landed a crisp blow on his nose. Vicky staggered back a few steps reeling under the impact.

'What the-' Vicky said out loud. People gathered around seeing the commotion. Vicky stepped close to her with a hand on his nose and tried to hit her back. But several guys held him back from doing so. 'You bloody bitch! How dare you? I will not leave you. I'll get back-' he shouted at her.

'I would like to see how,' Natasha thundered. 'Like you did now? Standing still and getting punched?'

'You will see-'

'Yes. And I want to see. Stay away from me.'

'Why? Did you find some other guy you can cheat on?'

She did not retort to that. She needed to breathe. And she needed a place where she could hide. She did not want to cry. And if she accidentally did, she did not want anyone to see her cry.

'Screw you,' she said and made her way out of the classroom.

'For how much?' Vicky called from behind.

She quickly made her way to the girls' washroom. She climbed up the basing, sat, and she cried. She finally let her tears flow, and they did. She tried to control her sobs; she did not want anyone to know. She was furious and immensely hurt.

A little while later, when her tears finally ceased flowing, she sat there, taking deep breaths. She washed her face to remove any signs of dried up tears. Not that anyone would notice. She made her way discreetly towards her class, picked up her bag, after checking that there was no teacher inside the classroom, and went to medical bay. She told the doctor she wasn't feeling well and the doctor gave her permission to go back home. She went home and slumped on the couch. Her head hurt from all the clutter inside it. Soon, she fell asleep and slept like a child.

When she woke up, it was around eight. She checked her phone, expecting to see no missed call and no unanswered text message. But she was taken by surprise. There was a text message from Shreya.

'What do you want to take? Physics or Chemistry?'

She thought of ignoring the message, but then realised that doing so would also mean that the topic would still be open for discussion the next day. She did not look forward to that at all. Another heated conversation with Vicky did not take her fancy.

'Chemistry.'

She settled with Chemistry, not because she knew Vicky would not give away Physics easily, but because she did not want a stupid argument about a stupid subject to ruin another one of her days. One scene was more than enough. She didn't need any more.

For once, she wanted to be invisible.

Chapter 7

I Love You Too

Natasha spent the next two days at home. She had to prepare for the quiz properly. Self-study was important, she told herself. Plus, she just needed a break from everything. Her dad was out for some work, and so, it was easy for her to stay at home. She was alone, but not lonely. There was no one to question her.

She did not understand what was happening to her lately. She had never been someone who would shed tears for anything. She just couldn't get the Vicky incident out of her head. She had no idea it would be so painful. She was used to being hated, but people had begun to show it now. She had thought it would go away with time, but it just kept getting worse everyday. Every new jibe, every new incident, killed a little part of her.

That day, when she sat down to study, she could not concentrate. Her mind kept wandering to everything that had happened to her. She knew she had to study. The first round of the quiz was within a week and their half-yearly exams were just around the corner, too. She had to do well in academics, she had pledged. That was the only thing she still had control over.

But all she could think about was how empty her life was. She had no friends, a malfunctioning family, a ruined 'love' life, and a tainted reputation. There was no one who genuinely cared for her. She had too many enemies, and no friends.

She suddenly started to miss Rana beyond belief. They had had good times together. He had seemed genuinely interested in her, not just her legs. She had started to rely on him. Even after everything, Natasha still believed that things would get back to normal between the two of them. He would still love her . . . when he realized that her feelings for him were true. Natasha knew he would realize that she didn't intend to use him.

She had her books open in front of her but she couldn't study. She watched television, surfed the net, but nothing seemed to catch her attention for too long. She started to go through her phonebook to check if there was someone she could talk to. And when the glimmer of a wish for her mom started to form in her mind, she hated herself for it and

pushed the thought right out of her head. She scrolled down and her eyes stuck on his name again. Rana.

She battled for a few minutes before she dialled the number. The phone rang a few times and Rana picked up. Natasha's hands trembled in anticipation.

'What do you want?' Rana asked without emotion.

'Rana ... I want to talk to you,' Natasha said. Rana's tone killed the hope in her.

'Again? Why don't you get it? We are done. We are through. Stop bothering me now!' he shouted suddenly.

'I just want to talk to you! Is that too much to ask for?' she asked, politely.

'Considering everything that has happened yes. It is way too much to ask for.'

'Listen to me. It won't kill you,' Natasha said a little angrily. She was not used to taking shit from anyone. But then she realized who she was talking to. Her tone softened. 'Please. I am not lying now. I want a chance ... just one last chance ...'

'A chance at what?'

'With you. I want a chance with you. I want us to get back together.'

'I know I have said it before, but-are you kidding me? Haven't I told you already-I do not care about what you want. So just stop it,' Rana shouted again. He was exceptionally loud. Why was he suddenly shouting so much?

'Please try to understand, Rana. I mean it. I am not lying. I really, really . . .' she held herself back before she could let the word 'love' escape her mouth.

'You really, really ... ? What? Go on!'

She took a deep breath, and said it out loud, 'I love you.' She was letting him see how vulnerable she was. She thought that would make him consider her request.

'You what?'

'I love you, Rana.'

'Why did you not tell me before? Baby, I love you too. You're my entire world!' he mocked, laughing at her.

'I do. I really do.'

And I love you too! How perfect. The two of us, madly in love with each other.'

'Rana ... please ... please believe me,' she begged. To her horror, her voice started to crack. If everything was not insulting enough already, she was going to cry too.

'Why should I? Why the hell should I?' he thundered. Natasha was taken aback. The tears stopped in their track. Her words died in her mouth. She was overcome with pain. Couldn't he see? He was killing her. Over and over again.

'I have had enough of this bullshit. And I want no more of it. Get the hell out of my life. I do not want you in it. So-go away,' he said and with an air of finality, hung up on her.

She knew she had lost him. She had wronged him once, but she had apologized, hadn't she? She had tried everything in her power to make things okay. There was nothing left to do. She lost all enthusiasm to even try. She brushed away the few tears covering her cheeks and got out of her room. She needed to go out. She needed to get some fresh air. But things were really not going her way. When she came out of her room, she realized that she was not alone. Her mom was there. Their eyes met for a brief moment before she rushed out of the house and ran as fast as her legs could take her.

She wanted to go as far away from everything as she could.

Chapter 8

Rana's Guilt

The last few of the guys made their way out of the house. Rana was tired. Not because of the party that just got over but because he had not been feeling too good about what he had just done. The crowd obviously enjoyed it. He felt it was right thing to do. He never meant to put the phone on loudspeaker when Natasha called, but when her number flashed, he got angry and couldn't control himself.

He mocked her and made fun of her. The guys enjoyed every bit of the conversation and so did he. But after he disconnected the call, he felt disgusted with himself.

'Hey,' Rishab said as he sat on the couch next to Rana. The house was in a mess. There were pizza boxes and beer bottles everywhere.

'We are such bastards,' Rana said.

'What? Why? Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for that bitch. She deserved it,' Rishab said.

'I don't think anyone deserved what I did. I think I should apologize.'

'Are you crazy? Shut up. She used you, and she is still trying to do the same. She just wants you around because she is alone right now. The moment she finds someone else, she'll dump you.'

'That's still no excuse to talk to her like that,' he said. He knew Rishab wouldn't understand. In fact, part of it was Rishab's idea.

'Are you in love with her? Still?'

'I don't know, Rishab. She screwed me over. I am very angry, but I think I have forgiven her.'

'Do you still love her?' he asked again.

'I don't know I just don't want to make her sad. I have had my revenge twice and I

have hurt her. I should feel better but I don't. I still want another shot with her. I don't know whether I love her or not.'

'You're screwed up!' Rishab said and laughed at him.

'Yeah, right. Look who's talking,' Rana jibed at Rishab.

'What do you mean?'

Rana knew that Rishab knew what he meant. Rishab had spent just a few months in The Presidency Convent and had fallen in love with Ananya-the new girl. Rishab and Ananya spent a lot of time together because they shared a lot in common. Rishab was from a boys' school, The Bishop Boys', and was there on transfer. Ananya was from Raipur. Both of them didn't know anyone else. Rishab, with a body that was sculpted and rock-hard after years on the tennis circuits, had a reputation in The Presidency College. Though people thought of him as a player, Ananya thought he was cute and well behaved.

But while Rishab fell in love with Ananya, she was more inclined towards the debating team captain-Yuvraj, Natasha's boyfriend. Rishab backed off and decided to be just friends with her. Though that hadn't stop his feelings from growing for her.

'You still like Ananya a lot.'

'Well, whatever,' Rishab shrugged it off.

'It's all your fault, Rishab. Had you not fallen in love with Ananya and called her to that party, I would have never met Natasha.'

'My fault? I didn't know Ananya would bring Natasha along. And even if she did, who asked you to kiss her?'

They both smiled as they thought of the people they loved. A small part of Rana was still with Natasha-the girl with the strawberry lips and the longest legs.

He made up his mind that he would go to her and apologize for what he had done.

Chapter 9

The Humiliation Continues

Shreya still hadn't come out of the shock of what she had heard. She talked to everyone she could find who would corroborate the story. Within the second and the third period, everybody knew what Rana had done to Natasha, the previous day. She sat on her seat thinking how could the news of a party in one of The Bishop Boys' houses become gossip in The Presidency Convent. She was disgusted at everyone around her. Most of them didn't even know who Rana was. He wasn't in the same school.

Natasha had spent the first two periods in the library. She wondered if Natasha knew. Just as the third period got over, Shreya rushed toward the library. She saw Natasha from a distance, studying. She guessed that Natasha didn't know.

'Shreya!' Natasha called her name out as soon she saw her.

'Natasha? Umm ... what's up?' Shreya said nervously.

'I just ... how is the preparation going?'

'I'm through with about fifty percent of the syllabus. It should be done in time. We still have four days to go for the first round.'

'Oh. Alright. Good.'

'How is Chemistry coming along? Shreya asked, awkwardly.

'It's cool. Almost half done. As in-organic is taken care of. And a bit of inorganic too. I just have to study physical Chemistry now ...'

'Nice! In fact, I am not bad at Physics either. If you want, we can study together? I might be able to help you with a few things,' Shreya said, still unsure of how to broach the topic.

Natasha closed her books and they left the library. Small groups of people outside their class looked at Natasha and snickered. Some of them laughed. Shreya glared at them and hoped they would shut up. It didn't help.

'What is going on?' Natasha said as she found a group of people who all turned towards her and laughed as she crossed them.

'What do you mean? Shreya asked, puzzled.

'I mean ... in school. Why is everyone acting weird around me? They were laughing, weren't they?' Natasha asked and Shreya's face drooped.

'They ... actually ... you know ...' Shreya stammered.

'What is it?'

'Okay . . . Did you talk to Rana yesterday? On the phone?'

'What? How do you know?' Natasha panicked. 'Don't tell me ... Everyone knows? How?'

'I think so,' Shreya said meekly, looking sympathetic.

'Damn.'

Shreya saw Natasha's shoulders droop and her eyes get wet. Shreya wasn't sure if what people were saying was true or not. Shreya hadn't believed it when people said Natasha had begged in front of Rana to take her back. But seeing Natasha's face, she knew people were right. She felt bad for her, more than she thought she ever would. Her heart crumbled to see Natasha like this.

'But, I ... I don't understand ... how? How did this happen?' Natasha wondered aloud.

'When you called, he was having a small party at his place. He had a few guys there from our school too.'

'Oh shit. Shit. Did someone overhear?' she asked frantically. Natasha forgot all about where she was and who she was talking to. She was too frenzied to worry about all that.

Actually ... not exactly overhear ...'

'Then? What? Did Rana tell anyone? Did he? Don't tell me. Because that just cannot be. Rana would never do that to me. Never.'

'Listen to me, Natasha-'

'No! You listen to me, Shreya. He is pissed at me, yes. But he would never do such a thing to me. He loves me. He doesn't know that yet, but it is true. He loves me.'

'Natasha, no! He does not.'

'What do you know? He does. Trust me, he-'

'Stop it! Just ... enough,' Shreya suddenly shouted. She looked around to see several heads turn towards them. 'Come with me.' She didn't want Natasha to freak out in front of everyone.

When they were safely away from the rest of the people at school, Shreya turned to Natasha. 'You cannot keep ranting that Rana loves you, in front of everyone. People are already thinking of you as a ...'

'As a? As a what?'

'They think that ... you are kind of ... losing your mind. They've never seen you quite so desperate ...'

'Desperate? How do they...? What is going on, Shreya? Tell me all you know,' Natasha demanded evenly.

'Rana did not tell anyone. He ... he put the call on loudspeaker when you talked. So . . . they all heard everything.'

Natasha eyes went blank. As if she had seen a ghost. Her skin turned pale and it looked like she was in shock. Shreya held her and tried to hug her, but Natasha pushed her away. Shreya's eyes filled up with tears, too. She couldn't see her like this. Shreya tried to talk to her but Natasha didn't answer. Her eyes were blank as if she was looking right through Shreya.

'Natasha! Are you okay?' Shreya asked her.

Natasha did not reply. She just kept walking, as if she were possessed. She walked away from the class and Shreya followed her.

'Natasha? Where are you going?' Shreya called again.

'Leave me alone.'

Are you alright? Can I take you back to class?'

'Just-go away,' Natasha growled and pointed a finger away from her.

Shreya staggered back as Natasha made her way to the reception. She waited there as Natasha argued with the gatekeeper to let her go home. After a few minutes, she saw Natasha get into her car and the driver driving away from the school.

Chapter 10

A Bottle of Sleeping Pills

Natasha was in a state of disarray. She walked to her car and instructed the driver to take her home. Her mind was blank and she couldn't think anything. Once there, she silently made her way to her room and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall, her mind strangely vacant. She just sat there silently, for a long, long time. She was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She wanted to think, but could not. Her mind was buzzing with too many things, too many emotions.

Her thinking was impaired. All she could do was stare blankly into nothingness. Her life made absolutely no sense. There was nothing she could live for, there was no purpose. No one loved her. People detested her. She could see hatred everywhere she went. She was not as untouched by it all as she had once pretended to be. Every snide remarked made her day a little worse.

It was like she had no significance in anyone's life. People at school hated her. Her mother pretended to care for her. Her father-recently-seemed to be way too busy juggling work and his wife. She mattered to no one. Her existence was inconsequential to everyone.

And so, she decided to end it.

Her existence had never made anyone happy. Maybe its end would make someone smile. At least the jibes will stop. They are painful.

She made her way to her dad's washroom. She knew he had a bottle of sedatives in the cupboard somewhere. He had developed insomnia right after his wife had left him. The trouble getting to sleep had seemed to continue forever. As expected, Natasha found a full bottle of sleeping pills in his washroom. She knew what she had to do. She picked up the bottle and unscrewed the cap. It was almost full. There were at least forty pills in it. That would be more than enough. Maybe she would leave a few of them in the bottle, for her dad. He would have trouble sleeping once she was gone, otherwise.

She filled a glass with water and held the bottle in her other hand. And then . . . she

paused. She had to say a proper goodbye to her dad. She made her way to her room and set the open bottle and the glass of water at the table. She pulled a chair, grabbed a notebook and a pen, and started to write.

Dad,

/ cloo't know where I will be when you read this. Maybe somewhere around here, in my room, dying. Maybe dead. Don't take me to the hospital /% not want to be saved I would not have done this, had I wanted to live.

/ do not know what to say. I have never done this before.

But/ just... I want to die, / cannot take it anymore. With no one by my side, I just see no sense in living.

I love you. It is not your fault in anyway. Please don't blame yourself

/hope you can forgive me.

Love,

Natasha

She completed the letter, and read what she had written. She knew it would not make much sense to her dad. He would probably never know the real reason for her ... suicide. She felt odd in her head, just thinking about the word. Suicide. But she could see no other way. She knew it would be unfair of her to keep the real reason of her suicide from her dad. But she just could not tell him. Also, she herself did not know what the real reason was. Things had kind of built up and reached a threshold. There was nothing that had actually happened to trigger it.

She tore away the page from the notebook and folded it carefully. She placed it on the top of her desk. And then she turned to the open bottle of sleeping pills, waiting for her.

Chapter 11

The Missed Call

Shreya was delaying calling Natasha as much as she could. She was not sure what kind of reaction to expect from her. They had been friends once ... but not anymore, and she didn't want to cross a line that she shouldn't. She was sitting on her bed, holding her phone ... not calling Natasha.

Something was holding her back. She knew she would have to call, sooner or later. The look on Natasha's face ... it would not let her sleep. She preferred to see Natasha cry. Like she used to do, right after her mother left her. The crying had stopped suddenly ... Natasha changed and changed for the worse. Shreya didn't want her to go through the same change again. She could feel that something bad was going to happen. She had an intuition ... So she brushed aside her own insecurity. What mattered at the moment was whether Natasha was okay. Not whether or not she would be interested in talking to Shreya.

And then, Shreya dialled Natasha's number. The first ring made Shreya jump slightly. She was nervous. She had no idea what she would say to her, if Natasha was willing to talk.

In case she freaked out, she would probably ask a general question like how are you and discuss something about the quiz after that. Yes, that would be perfect, she thought. But she was spared the ordeal of coming up with something to say. Natasha did not take her call. She did not reject it, but the message was loud and clear. She did not want Shreya to interfere. Or that was how Shreya thought it must have been like.

She was not sure. It might have been anything. Maybe Natasha was caught up somewhere. Maybe she did not see the call. Maybe she did not want to talk. Maybe she ... maybe she was really sad, and did not feel like talking to anyone.

When she went over these possibilities, she realized that not receiving one call did not mean she did not want to talk. A lot of things could have happened. So she waited for Natasha to call back after she saw her missed call. Shreya hoped that Natasha would respond to the missed call. She wanted her to.

A few hours later, when she still had no word from Natasha, she stopped waiting. She did not know what the case was. She did not want to call again, in case Natasha really did not want to talk.

She just hoped Natasha was alright.



Natasha was startled by her phone ringing suddenly. She dropped the glass of water she was holding and accidentally splashed water on her suicide note and all over the carpet.

'Shit,' she muttered and brushed the water away. She grabbed her phone and looked at the display. Shreya? Maybe Shreya just wanted to discuss something about the quiz. That was why they had exchanged their numbers in the first place. But she knew Shreya was calling for whatever had happened in the school that day.

She knew Shreya. She knew what kind of person she was. After the conversation they had had in school that day, Natasha was sure that Shreya would be worried about her. She was that kind of a girl. Sweet and caring. That made Natasha feel even more like shit. All the regret she had once felt for what she had done to Shreya resurfaced. The pain was almost piercing. The only person standing next to her was a friend she had betrayed. A friend whose life she had made hell by planting those magazines inside her bag.

Finally, came the tears. For the lost friendship. For the sad excuse of a life. For the ruined reputation. For Rana's betrayal. For the defunct family. She kept holding her phone, and it kept ringing. She did not have the strength to receive the call. She was not strong enough to face the world. Not even Shreya. How would she be able to face her? After all she had once done to her?

1 Missed Call, the display of her phone read.

She was taken back to when she and Shreya were still friends. They had been inseparable. They had been perfect.

I'm a bitch. She thought she deserved everything that she was getting. She brushed away the tears and looked at the glass lying on the carpet. She contemplated picking it

up, filling water in it and ... dying. But something stopped her.

She remembered what Shreya had told her during the days she was grappling with her mother's absence. 'You're not a quitter.' Suddenly, the words started to resound in her head repeatedly. For the next few minutes, that was all she could hear in her head. Slowly, the gravity of the situation started to seep into her and realised what she had been about to do. The full implications of her actions dawned on her and she started thinking clearly. I am trying to kill myself. I won't see anyone again. Her head got a little dizzy and she started seeing things in double.

Just then, there was a soft knock on her door. She turned to see her dad open the door and get in.

'Why are the lights off?' he said and switched them on.

The sudden light blinded her a little. Her dad walked inside the room and she put the glass of water down. She panicked. Her gaze shot to the table, where the open bottle of sleeping pills sat. Then she realized her mistake following her gaze, her dad also turned towards the table. Before he could see the bottle of pills, Natasha tried to distract him. 'Dad! You're back already? Weren't you going to be late tonight?'

'Yes. Got free earlier than expected,' he turned back towards her. His expression did not change. Natasha was not sure whether he noticed the bottle or not.

'Oh. Good. So, what is the plan?' She said and tried to act normal. She stood up to hide the bottle.

'Plan? What do you want to do?' he asked. Natasha noticed the change of expression on his face. Maybe he knew what was happening.

'Umm ... I don't know. I just thought that we would do something together, since you have time . . .' Natasha blabbered randomly. Inside, she was shivering with fear. She did not know how he would react if he found out what almost happened. And she did not want him to find out.

'Like what?'

A ... movie, maybe? Or dinner? Whatever you want ...'

'Natasha, is something up? You're acting a little weird,' her dad peered at her and asked.

'No, no. Nothing's up! I just wanted to spend a little time with you ... that's all,' she answered hurriedly.

'Okay. So let's go out for dinner?'

'Yeah. Or a movie?' she suggested hastily. Movie meant no need for conversation. She was looking forward to that.

'Alright.'

And half an hour later, she found herself in a car with him. When they sat in the cinema theatre, she felt a little odd. She had not seen a movie with her dad since ... the fourth grade. He used to take her to the movies when she was a kid. Then, things changed. He got busier with work and her mom got busier with ... other things. And then, when her mom left, things changed even more. As she watched the movie with him, she realised how much she had loved doing that once. And also that her dad was probably watching a movie after eight years!

By the end of it, her mind was a lot calmer. She almost forgot about all the depressing things in her life. She laughed a good laugh after ages. For a moment, she felt like everything was alright with her world. After the movie, she dragged her dad to a pizza parlour, knowing fairly well that he hated pizza. It was always fun to argue with him and make him do things he did not want to do. She thought about what she had almost done and felt stupid about it.

When they settled in their seats in Pizza Hut, she looked around. Two familiar figures caught her eye. Were they who she thought they were? Her heart stopped. In happiness and anticipation.

Ananya and Rishab? Together? She squinted her eyes to see, but could not figure them out. She wondered if something was brewing up between the two of them. Natasha knew that Rishab had always had a thing for Ananya.

'So, what do you want?' her dad asked and she turned back to him.

They placed their orders and she soon forgot all about Ananya. That night, she had a

good time with her dad. She had initially been happy that they wouldn't need to talk during the movie, but honestly, she had more fun talking to him than just seeing the movie with him. She felt a pang of affection for him. On the way back home, her dad got an important call from work. She heard his side of the conversation.

'Yes?' he said. 'What? But how did that happen?'

No. I cannot come. Isn't there someone else who can take care of this?'

'Call Mitra. Ask him to be down there right now.'

I am sure that would be enough.'

Natasha whispered, 'Go!' but he did not pay heed. He argued with whoever it was on the other end and ultimately, did not go back to work. There was obviously a crisis there, but he chose to stay with his daughter.

'Why didn't to go?' Natasha asked when he hung up.

'I am just a little tired to work now,' he shrugged nonchalantly.

It was a little odd. Her dad was the kind of person for whom work was what mattered the most. She had never seen him cancel an appointment. She had seen him rush to work halfway between birthday parties and anniversary celebrations all her life. This was a first. She wondered what was up. By the time they got back home, she had a grin on his face. When she got to her room, the bottle of sleeping pills was not on the table. Nor could she find the glass on the carpet.

He knew.

She realized that she was why he had not rushed to work in the crisis. He chose to stay home. He must have figured what she was planning to do, and had instructed the servants to take away her suicide weapons. Her dad must have taken care of that. The note she had written to him was still there. She crumpled it and threw it into the bin. Suddenly, she was not as happy as she had been a little while ago. She wondered why her dad never mentioned anything. It would have killed him just to think that she was going to do something that drastic.

Her eyes fell on her cell phone, still lying on the bed. She picked it up. 1 Missed

Call. Without giving too much thought, she dialled Shreya's number.

'Hello?' Shreya said.

'Uh, hi ...'

'Natasha?'

Natasha thought for a while and said dryly, 'Yes, Shreya. This is me. You called earlier today?'

'Yes, I did. Actually ... I was wondering if you were okay. After the . . . thing in school today, I was a little concerned . . .' Shreya said. Natasha smiled thinking that at least someone was concerned about her.

'I am okay . . . I was a little disturbed, but now it's fine.'

'Good. So ... will you be coming to school tomorrow?'

'I ... I don't think so.'

'Why? You can't run away from them forever. You have to face them, sooner or later. You know that, right?'

Natasha kept silent.

'Natasha ... ? Are you listening?'

'Hmm.'

'Come to school,' Shreya said and paused. 'We have just three days left for the first round of the quiz.'

'Oh, right. I totally forgot,' Natasha replied. She had been preparing for the quiz just that morning. But when Shreya mentioned it, it felt like something from ages ago. 'Who are we competing against?'

'In the first round? Our classmates.'

'In our section or ... ? Actually, I really do not know much about the quiz. I didn't listen in class. Do you mind giving me an overview?'

'Of course not. See-in the first round, we have to compete within our section. The team that wins will be selected. Amit Sir will decide which four teams go to the second round. The team that wins the second round goes to the third,' Shreya explained.

'The third round is going to be held at IIT, right? Only one team will go there?'

'Yes. Just one team from The Presidency. We will then compete against three other schools.'

'Which schools?' Natasha asked.

The Bishop Boys, DPS R K Puram and Modern.'

'Oh, okay.'

So Rana might be there, too. The thought suddenly came to her head and she felt unimaginable anger towards him. How quickly emotions change, she thought to herself.

'Yeah. So we'd better start preparing. And oh, the first round is written. We'll be given a set of thirty objective questions to solve in thirty minutes,' Shreya continued.

'Written? But I thought . . . Why would a quiz be written?'

'It's just the first round. The organisers asked for one team from our school. So the first two rounds are just in order to select the best team.'

'Alright,' Natasha said. There was silence. They had nothing to talk about. Obviously. They shared nothing else other than a tainted history and a quiz team. Suddenly, she remembered what she had seen in that pizza place that day. 'Hey? Do you know Rishab?'

'Rishab?' Shreya struggled to remember. She wasn't the gossiping type. 'Oh yes, the guy from Bishop who was in our school for a few months.'

'Yes, that guy. I saw him with Ananya today. On a date.'

'But Ananya is dating Yuvraj, right?'

'She is, but Rishab always had feelings for Ananya, plus they used to be really close when he was in our school,' Natasha said. 'Do you think I should tell Yuvraj? Or maybe blackmail Ananya a little?' Natasha snickered.

'Why would you do that?'

'For obvious reasons,' Natasha said, 'They screwed with me, now I want to do that with them.'

'C'mon Natasha. You're better than that,' Shreya said. 'Let it be. If they are not honest with each other, it's their problem. Revenge never solved anything.'

'It doesn't? You mean to say that what Rana did to me should go unpunished too?'

'Karma. God is watching, Natasha,' she said.

'I don't believe in God,' Natasha said and shrugged it off.

'But I believe in you, and I know you are a better person than that,' she said. There were voices behind Shreya. It was her mom. She had to go. 'See you tomorrow, then?' she asked.

'I guess,' Natasha said meekly after thinking for a while.

'Cool. See you then.'

'Bye.'

She thought about what Shreya had said. It made no sense. The people who had wronged her should be wronged in return. Her phone beeped and broke her train of thought.

It said:

You're a nice person. You will come through. Don't worry. I am with you.

Natasha did not reply to it. She did not understand why Shreya was being so sweet to her. It was a weird situation and she had no idea how to handle it. But when she slept that night, she had a slight smile on her face. At least someone cared for her. She needed someone and she had found that someone. She had never thought it would be the girl she had betrayed.

Chapter 12

The Bitch

The next day, the day started on a bad note. Outside her class, there were a group of guys waiting to ambush her. She tried to hurry past them but they had their jibe ready.

'I love you. I really do,' A guy mocked Natasha, in a girl-ish tone, imitating her. There was a whole bunch of guys with him, all laughing madly at her. 'Would you please take me back? Please, please. Believe me-I love you for real. Take me back?'

'Not even if you magically grew a dick,' she replied evenly and walked away.

Everyone laughed and she walked away from them. She was surprised that people still cared. They had nothing more interesting to do than gossip about her. Losers. After the first lecture, she saw Shreya wave at her. She waved back. Shreya motioned her to meet outside.

'Hey! Everything alright?' she asked.

'Yes, fine,' Natasha returned her smile.

'Good. Listen, I was thinking-shall we bunk some of the classes? We seriously need to prepare for the quiz, you know?'

'Yeah, we do. But-not with Vicky. I'm not studying with him.'

'I thought so. I haven't asked him to come with us,' Shreya grinned.

'Thank God! So, how much are you done with?'

'I've completed Maths. We had decided to cover one subject properly. But then, we also need to know about the other two subjects, right? To cross-check answers in case of confusion.'

'Yeah. Makes sense,' Natasha replied shortly. She prayed Shreya would not ask the question she was obviously going to ask. Which she did.

'How much have you done?'

'Most of it. Just a few topics remaining.'

'Nice. So that means we have Maths and Chemistry almost covered. I just hope Vicky is doing a good job with Physics,' Shreya said.

'He must be, considering he was so keen on taking it up.'

'Yeah. But that was just to piss you off, not for his real interest in the subject.'

'I know. So, I think that's what we should study now. Physics. Since the other two subjects are already more or less done?' Natasha suggested.

'Really? I thought I could help you with Maths and you can help me with Chemistry. That would have taken lesser time ...'

'I know, but what's the rush? We still have three more days. Let's concentrate on Physics today and we can do what you're suggesting after that.'

'Okay. Whatever you say. Let's go to the library?'

'Sure.'

They went to the library and took out books for Physics. Seeing Shreya pick up the thickest of them, Natasha got a little nervous. The truth was that she had not completed even a single chapter of Chemistry. God only knew why she suggested that they should study Physics first. She had not completed her subject, and was wasting her time on others'. But then, had she gone by Shreya's plan, she would have been caught in no time. How could she teach something she herself did not know anything about? She had no way of getting out the sticky situation.

'Wait-let me get my book,' she said and got up from her seat. She remembered that she had opened wave optics a few days ago. She was hoping that she remembered something from it.

She searched for the book she had referred to when she had first started to prepare for the quiz, but could not find it anywhere. She made her way to the back of the library, where she knew they stacked the slightly defected copies of books to be sent for mending later. She had almost reached the back when she heard a strange whimpering sound from

nearby. She looked around but saw nothing. A moment later, just when she bent to pick up a book, she heard someone moan again, a little away from her. She left the book and went deeper inside the library.

And then she saw them-Ananya and Yuvraj, holding each other, kissing. She paused for a while, and came in clear view of them. As soon as Ananya noticed her standing there, she hastily broke the kiss and stared at her. Yuvraj turned and his eyes met Natasha's.

She smiled a twisted half smile.

Before any of them could say anything, she turned on her heel and started to walk away. She was furious, her eyebrows made a small hill and blood flushed her face. As she walked further away, the lines that had deepened her forehead slowly vanished and her face returned to its normal colour. A smile replaced the frown. It was the first time she had smiled that wide in a long time. Since Ananya took it away, to be precise.

'Natasha!' a voice called from behind her.

Ananya's voice registered in Natasha's mind, but she didn't look back. She kept walking, with a smile on her face and plan in her devious head.



'The book?' Shreya asked.

'Huh?' Natasha looked at her uncertainly.

'You said you were getting some book?'

'Oh, that. I couldn't find it. Someone must've issued it already,' Natasha said. She had been so lost in what she had just seen that she forgot all about the quiz and the book she was trying to find.

'Never mind. What shall we start with?' Shreya asked, after they chose a seat in a corner, so that no teacher caught them bunking class.

'I don't know. Anything you like. Is there a syllabus?'

'No. You just have to know everything, I guess! The more weird the facts, the more important they are.'

'How are we supposed to do that?' Natasha asked.

'We will just study a little of everything. That might work?'

'I guess,' Natasha said. 'That's what I did in Chemistry,' she added as an afterthought.

'So ... let's start with Magnetism?' Shreya suggested.

They started studying together and Natasha was surprised by how easy it was to be with Shreya. There was no pretending, no ego clashes, no cold wars. She liked the feeling. For years, she had only pretended. She was living up to what people perceived her as-a rich, brat of a girl who was every guy's dream. She didn't hate the feeling, but she liked what she and Shreya had.

Shreya got up. 'Do you want to attend the rest of the classes? After lunch?'

'Not really,' Natasha shrugged.

'I'm not attending either. If we win this ...'

'Do you think we have a chance? I mean, what are the chances? Everyone's participating.'

'True. But I think we do have a decent chance. At least in the first round,' Shreya said.

'Why? Because it is written?'

'Yes. I get a little anxious on stage.'

'Come on, I will be there with you,' Natasha said and held her hand.

'I am such a coward,' Shreya laughed.

'That you are!' Natasha smiled back.

'So, see you here after lunch?'

'Yeah.'

Their confidence was high and it was evident in their smiles. After lunch, they charted out exactly what they had to study in the coming days. They wondered if anyone else was working as hard as they were. They spent the next few periods sitting in the library talking about everything else, but the quiz. Natasha was happy that Shreya could hold a conversation which didn't include bitching about somebody.

Natasha was happy.

Chapter 13

The Insecurity

Yuvraj sat on the corner table in the library, his head sunk deep in his books. There were just a few months to go before the board exams and the IIT entrance examinations and he was expected to perform well. In addition, there was the quiz too. His girl, Ananya, was studying day and night for this while he was yet to touch any topic.

He sat there thinking about Ananya's sweet face and warm touch. He wondered if they would go to the same college after school ended. He wondered if they would be in the same city. It had been just a little while since they had started seeing each other, but she meant the world to him. She was there when he caught Natasha cheating on him. She was there to hold his hand and tell him that everything would be alright. It was not a relationship on the rebound. What he had with Ananya made him understand what real relationships were like.

He was in a reverie, thinking of the time Ananya and he had spent together, when he heard a voice over his shoulder.

Alone?' she looked at him and asked.

'What?' Yuvraj asked. It was Natasha. He was shocked because they had never talked after the day he had caught Natasha kissing Rana. The images were still fresh in his head.

'Where is your lovely girlfriend? Ananya?'

He didn't like Natasha's tone. He closed his books and got up.

'Oh, come on! You should reply when people talk to you. Didn't anyone teach you?' she laughed.

'Leave me alone,' Yuvraj said. He had not seen Natasha not sulk or look defeated in a long time. The smile on Natasha's face never meant any good for anyone. It meant she was up to something. He had dated her and he knew.

`Why? I'm bad company?'

`I did not say that. I just don't think we have anything to talk about anymore,' he said and walked away.

She followed him, `Really? Because we broke up?'

`Amongst other things.'

`Hmm. But I think there are a few things we could discuss ...'

With every sentence, Yuvraj was freaking out. Natasha had always been intimidating for him. A certain part of him was also scared of her. He had seen the dominating nature of hers, the mean side of hers, and he knew it was not pretty.

`You're not in mood to talk, are you? Is everything okay? Or is it because I accidentally walked into your little makeout session? You know? In the back of the library ... ?'

`It's none of your business,' Yuvraj said angrily.

`I am making it my business. By the way-where is she? Bored of you already?'

Yuvraj kept walking away. Natasha stopped.

`Of course. She must be done with you for today ... must be Rishab's turn now, right?'

Natasha suggested fakeinnocently.

`What?' Yuvraj stopped in his tracks and turned around.

`I just thought-maybe she is busy with Rishab now? She must be tired after everything. Must have got home late last night, after her date with Rishab-'

`Shut up, Natasha! You have no idea what you are talking about.'

`Oh? I don't? But I thought it was you who is getting double-crossed. There must be something wrong with you. All your girlfriends tend to turn away and look for other options...' she trailed away.

`What do you mean?' Yuvraj said and walked up to her.

'Ask Ananya what she was doing with Rishab in her intimate dinner. You don't know that these two met, right?' she snickered.

'Umm ... I know.'

'No, you don't. It's written all over you face, exboyfriend.'

'I am not concerned. I love her and I trust her.'

'Look at you,' Natasha mocked. 'You don't trust her. Your hands are shaking, your face is red, and you're burning.'

'I am not. I said I don't care.'

'You should. But what you should care more about is that back-alley kiss you shared with Ananya. What if a teacher gets to know about it?' she said, smiled her evil smile and walked away from him.

Yuvraj was numb. He stood there, shaken. He knew he was concerned. He wanted to know what Ananya hadn't told him. He wasn't too concerned about the kiss becoming the knowledge of a teacher because no one would believe Natasha. But, Rishab? How could Ananya meet him alone? Still, that's not what bothered him. What did bother him was why Ananya hadn't told him?



Natasha knew that the harm was done. She had planted a seed of doubt in Yuvraj's mind, which would not be quenched easily. The look on Yuvraj's face told her that she would at least cause a fight. It was not much, but at least a start. She smiled.

She got back to the library and looked around. Shreya was not there yet. So she decided to fetch the books till the time she got there. By the time she had arranged the books on the table, Shreya was back. They spent the rest of their day in school, studying together. Natasha had to agree, she preferred it to studying alone like she always did. Shreya was good company. And Natasha had almost forgotten how having someone nice around felt.

'How much more is left?' Natasha asked, as they put the books back on their shelves, when the school ended.

'Almost half of it. Why are we studying at such a slow pace? Are we studying too much in detail ... ?' Shreya wondered aloud.

Are you kidding me? We are barely skimming the topics. We can't go any faster.'

'Yes, but ... this is so difficult. We do not even have a specified syllabus. All we know is that it is a science quiz ...'

'Hold on. Does that ... does that mean there will be questions from biology too?' Natasha asked suddenly.

'Shit. I never thought of that. What if there is?' Shreya looked at Natasha in horror.

'I have no idea! I guess we just have to hope that it won't be so.'

'There's no other way ... we do not have enough time ... I have this book of biology at home ... maybe I could just browse through a few topics once ...'

Natasha smiled. She could see the whole thought process going on in Shreya's head. She knew that even though she was saying browse through, Shreya would not leave any topic untouched. She was like that. The perfectionist. Natasha, herself, was one too. She suspected that she had got that trait from Shreya. After all, they used to spend a lot of their time together.

'Never mind. We do not have much chance in this quiz anyway,' Natasha chuckled. The worried look on Shreya's face was almost humorous.

'What? No! We can't give up. Not yet. It's not like the other people in class know any more than us. We have a definite chance,' Shreya said.

'Whatever you say.'

'Listen-I will go through biology today. You just keep the next two days free. We need to study.'

'As if I have a social life,' Natasha muttered. 'I'll be available, don't worry.'

'Good. I think we might be able to do it.'

'I hope so,' Natasha said.

'Can I ask you something Natasha?'

'Sure.'

'I saw you talking to Yuvraj today. What were you talking about?' Shreya asked.

'Nothing.'

'I just don't want you to go back into the past. There is no use in holding grudges. Let's move past them and concentrate on the quiz, Natasha.'

'I will keep that in mind, thank you.'

They went back to get their bags from the classroom. A lot of people stared at them. Everyone knew about their once-very-strong friendship. People had always been interested in Natasha's personal matters. The guys always loved her and the girls always hated her. Nothing had changed. Except perhaps, now, the guys loved and hated her.

Chapter 14

Like Old Times

Shreya's enthusiasm was contagious. Grudgingly, Natasha had to admit that she was excited about the quiz too. It was the only time when she could forget everything and channelize all her thoughts and energy in one direction. For the next two days, they were in the library. They mugged up everything they thought could be asked in the quiz. They were taking it seriously, and it showed. Although they didn't talk about it, they knew they had a decent chance. No one was working as hard as they were.

When the bell rang for lunch, Shreya said, 'You go ahead. I think I'll skip it and complete this topic in the meantime.'

'That's sad. I was wondering if we could ...' Natasha trailed away.

'We could ... ? What were you saying?'

'Nothing important. I was just thinking that ... maybe we could have lunch together today?'

'Yeah. Why not? Let's go,' Shreya said. It was a reflex statement from Shreya. Like she didn't even have to give it a second thought. Natasha liked that. She liked the feeling of going to lunch with somebody.

Once they settled down with their food, things fell silent. Even though they had been spending a lot of time together, they had not been talking. All they ever talked about was related to the quiz. That was the only topic they ever touched. So when they sat facing each other in the canteen, there was an uneasy silence. Then, as if by un-said mutual consent, they both concentrated on their respective plates. That expunged any need for conversation.

When they got back to the library, they ran straight into Mr Sharma. He was the Maths teacher and a real hard task master. In a school filled with rich brats with power, he was as strict as anyone could be. Another scene with him was the last thing Natasha wanted.

'Why weren't you two in class this morning?' he asked when he spotted them.

They were surprised. He never remembered much about his students, so this was new.

'Actually, sir, we were in the library ...' Shreya started.

'Why? Did you not know that classes were going on?' he asked.

'We did, sir. But we needed to study for the quiz, so . .

'So? So you just decided to bunk classes without permission? Does the school system work according to you?'

'No sir. But we really needed to prepare,' Natasha said.

'Oh? All this for some quiz? Do you think your stupid science quiz is more important than Maths?' he said.

Natasha and Shreya exchanged a look.

'No, sir.'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Go back to class. Right now. I have another class today. And I want to see both of you there,' he said.

'Yes, sir,' they echoed.

Once out of his earshot, Natasha let out, 'Shit. Shit. What did he mean by "is your stupid science quiz more important than Maths?" Does that mean ... ?'

'Yes. It's a science quiz. There will be no Maths in it,' Shreya said, dejected. 'I spent all of my time in it. I started with the other subjects just now. Why didn't they tell us?'

'Relax. I hope we still have a chance.'

'Maybe.'

'But what other option do we have? Let's make most of whatever little time we have. Sharma is such a Hitler, by the way,' Natasha said.

'I know. If only we had time to study together ...'

They had been walking, and had almost reached their classroom by then. Natasha turned to Shreya. 'Unless we...

'Unless we?'

'We can study together. After school?'

'Yeah. I will skip my tuitions and we can meet up somewhere ... ?' Shreya asked.

'Yes. My place?' Natasha suggested.

Shreya paused for a while. The last time she had been to Natasha's place was a long time back. She had gone there for a sleepover. She had forgotten her bag there. And it had come back to her place the next day ... with dirty magazines in it. And Shreya's life had turned around. She hesitated a little as her thoughts went back to that night and what followed after.

'Sure,' she said at last.

Natasha smiled at her.



Natasha paced around her room, like she had been doing since a long time. She was actually nervous about Shreya coming over. She grudgingly admitted to herself that she had started to like her company. Shreya had started to matter to her and she hoped the feeling was mutual. She could never be sure with Shreya because she was always well behaved. She was sweet even to those who were mean to her. So Natasha did not understand what to think about how Shreya had been acting with her lately.

She rearranged the photo frames in her room a zillion times. Her pictures with Shreya of when they were kids were still there in her room. Every time her room was rearranged, only the position of the photos changed. But the pictures stayed. She tried to rearrange the pictures and put her pictures with Shreya in the most prominent places. But then, she thought against it. That would come across as desperate. She put them back in the corner. She was just about to shift them again when she heard a car stop outside.

She's here, Natasha panicked.

There was a soft knock on her door. It was the maid, to inform her of Shreya's arrival. Natasha didn't want the maid to get the door. That would be snobbish. She ran down the stairs. She was nervous. It had been years since she had a female friend over.

'Hi,' she smiled at Shreya. She was breathing a little heavy from the run, and her eyes had a twinkle in them. Natasha was excited.

'Hey!' Shreya greeted back warmly.

'What's up?' Natasha said, and cursed herself for the poor conversation starter.

'Pretty much the same as it was a few hours ago,' Shreya said, confused.

Natasha recovered quickly. 'Let's get started then?' she said.

'Sure. I have to get back home by seven.'

'Seven? How will we do it all in just four hours?'

'I don't know. We'll just have to rush through everything, I guess,' Shreya said.

'Like we have been doing since always.'

'Right. But at least we're trying our best.'

Natasha looked at her. 'You still won't give up, would you?'

'Never. And neither should you. This has to be the sole ambition of our lives. We have to do this, you get it? Have to!' she said with faked enthusiasm.

'Yeah, yeah. I get it!'

They laughed. And from there on, it was a smooth ride. There were no awkward moments between them. It was almost like the good old times. They talked, they laughed, and they studied. They studied non-stop for hours, till it was time for Shreya to go back. When the clock struck seven, they let out a moan together. They didn't want it to end.

'I need to go now. Mom will freak out. You know how she is,' Shreya said.

'Shit. Just a couple of hours and it would have been done,' Natasha said.

'Yeah. But I ...'

'Can't you stay? For the night? We can complete the whole syllabus?'

Shreya's expression changed, Natasha chewed her lips. She wondered what was going through Shreya's head. Was she thinking about what had happened the last time she slept over? Natasha really wanted Shreya to stay. She craved for human company. And Shreya had been nice to her. There were only two people in the world who didn't think she was a bitch-her dad and Shreya.

'I mean ... only if you want to ... there's no pressure ...' she mumbled, a little hot in the face.

'It's not that. Of course I want to.' Shreya said quickly and Natasha released the breath she realized she had been holding.

'Oh. Then? You'd have to ask Mom?'

'Yeah. I don't know if she would let me. . .'

'At least ask?' Natasha suggested.

'Yeah. Just a second,' she said as she took out her phone to call her mom.

Natasha heard snippets of things Shreya said. It seemed like her mom was surprised that Shreya wanted to sleepover at Natasha's place. She knew they had not been friends since a long time.

'I know, mom. But it's for the quiz! We really need to study,' Shreya reasoned.

After a lot of cajoling, Shreya was allowed to stay back at Natasha's place. Natasha was beaming when she heard that. Almost immediately, they reopened their books. Suddenly, their effectiveness dipped. They started to talk about things other than the books and the quiz.

Shreya started to pour her heart out about how the past few years had gone. Her parents were strict with her. She wasn't allowed to go out. Every friend of hers was questioned. Every move was seen in suspicion. Natasha's heart rotted in guilt. Once

finished, she thanked Natasha for listening to her. She even hugged Natasha. Natasha felt like a bitch.

Natasha suggested they should start studying again. But after an hour, they were exhausted. They had had a rough couple of days. They finally gave up. Shreya, though, still looked like she could study the whole night. Natasha let out a yawn and lay down on her bed. Shreya looked at her, a little surprised. 'What happened?' she asked.

'This is it. I'm not reading another word. There's no way I'm reading another word,' Natasha said.

'But we still have-'

'I am done.'

Shreya thought about it for a minute, and then closed the books shut. She relaxed against the head rest. 'I think you're right. We've basically completed the entire syllabus ... more or less.'

'And we don't even know if the freaking questions will be framed from it!'

'Yeah. But at least we are already prepared for the halfyearly exams.'

'Half yearly ... ? Oh shit. I forgot all about them,' Natasha made a face.

It was going to be a hectic month. Even more so, if they cleared the first round and got into the next. Between the quiz and the half-yearly exams, they would barely get any breathing time. Just then, the maid informed them that dinner was ready. When they got down to the dining room, they saw Natasha's mom waiting for her at the table. She looked beautiful and looked at Natasha lovingly.

Her dad was there too. Her face fell. This couldn't be happening.

'Shreya?' her mom and dad said in unison.

Shreya smiled. 'Hello, Uncle. Hello, Aunty. How are you?'

'It's so nice to see you! How have you been?' her mother let out. Natasha rolled her eyes. She kept shut as her mom and Shreya talked.

'I'm good, Aunty. It's nice to see you too,' Shreya smiled warmly at her.

'I didn't know you were over!'

'It was not planned. I came here to study and decided to stay over ...

'You have informed your parents, right?' Natasha's mom asked.

'Yes, I called Mom,' Shreya smiled.

It went on like that throughout the dinner, making Natasha feel left out. She remembered the feeling. It was so even when they were kids. Her mother had always been extremely fond of Shreya. She had once even asked Natasha to be more like Shreya.

So much so that Natasha had always felt insecure seeing them together. She brushed away the feeling. She hated her mom. Didn't she? Soon, the conversation got a little easier. Her dad asked them about their preparation for the quiz. They made small talk and made it through the dinner with no casualties.

When they got back to her room, Natasha was completely drained. They decided to call it a night and to wake up a little early to go through the remaining portion. They both knew they were going to do no such thing. The last chapter of a book is always the hardest to complete. They had neither the energy, nor the drive to do it.

'I am exhausted,' Natasha said.

'So am I,' Shreya said, already under the blanket and drowsing.

'I am so glad we could do this. Thank you for staying over.

'It was my pleasure. It's good to see you smile,' Shreya said.

Natasha smiled. 'Do you want to hear something cool?'

What?'

'Do you know that we have security cameras in every aisle of the library?' Natasha said with a glint in her eyes.

'No, why?'

'They're there and all the videos are archived. So do you know what will happen if there are two students caught making out on one those tapes?'

'They will get expelled?' Shreya said, not knowing where Natasha was going with this.

'Exactly,' Natasha said and smiled at her.

'I don't know what you're up to, just don't get into trouble,' Shreya said and buried her face in the pillow.

Natasha waited till Shreya fell asleep.

Chapter 15

I Should Have Stayed Home

Natasha's father, Amitabh Malhotra, tried desperately to keep his voice down. He was fighting with Natasha's mom, who was in tears. She blamed him for what Natasha had tried to do to herself. He was guilty too. He could see Natasha had been disturbed for the last few days and he could do nothing to make it better. He had been too busy with Natasha's mother who wanted to be back in their lives.

Three years before, Natasha's mother had left her father because there was a woman involved. He had cheated on Natasha's mom. Since her mother knew Natasha loved her father more than she loved her, she had left. She didn't say a word about why she was leaving. She was hurting. Before she left, she asked Natasha's dad not to tell Natasha anything about what happened.

Since then, Natasha had hated her mom. There were times when Amitabh wanted to tell Natasha the truth about her mom and his wife, but the promise kept him from doing so. Ever since she left, Amitabh had been begging her to come back. It took him three years to get her back.

'But why not today?' Amitabh asked her. He wanted to tell Natasha that he and her mother wanted to be together again.

'Because she has Shreya over ... It would not be the best of times,' her mother reasoned.

'Why? It's a good thing. With Shreya here, it would be easier to manage her. Shreya would be a help,' he reasoned with his wife.

'I don't know . . . they haven't exactly been close all these years, have they?'

'But Shreya is here tonight. She is staying over. So that only means that they are friends now.'

'There is still something wrong between them ...'

'Maybe. But I'm happy that Shreya is here. I was getting worried about Natasha.'

'Worried? Why? Things at school have not improved yet?' her mother asked.

'Doesn't seem so. And I think ... I think there is a boy involved.'

'What? Why do you think so?'

'I don't know ... something is definitely up.. .' Amitabh wondered aloud. 'She needs you. Now more than ever. I think we should tell her everything. I am sure she will understand. It's very hard for me to hide it. She doesn't ask anymore, but I still need to tell her.'

'Something is wrong. I can tell. What are you hiding? What is going on?'

Her dad paused for a minute before saying, 'She tried to kill herself.'

'What?' her mother let out at the same time as Natasha burst into the room, shouting, Dada'

They all stared at each other for a short moment and started to speak at the same time. Amitabh wondered what all Natasha had heard.

'Natasha? What are you doing here? Were you eavesdropping?' Amitabh asked, furious and nervous at the same time.

'Is it true? Why? Are you crazy? What did you do? Why were you trying to end your life?' her mom shrieked. Her eyes were glazed over with tears.

'Why did you tell her?' Natasha shrieked. She ignored whatever they said and kept speaking. 'You know I hate her.'

'Beta, please-' her mother started, but Natasha cut her off.

'Stay out of this. This is none of your business!' she shouted.

'But I'm just trying to-' her mother started again.

'Shut up before I hurt you.'

'Natasha! She is your mother,' Amitabh said, feeling guilty. He barely kept himself

from telling Natasha that it wasn't her mother's fault, but his.

'No, she is not. She stopped being my mother the day she left us.'

'But she came back. She cares about you. And she had a right to know. It wasn't her fault that she left us.'

'It was her fault. She does not care about me.' Natasha cried. Amitabh's heart shrank.

'She does. And I do too. We worry about you ...'

'There is no need to. I'm okay, I'm fine. You don't need to be concerned about me.'

'Then why did you go missing? What was my bottle of sedatives doing on your table? Why were your eyes red? Why were you shocked to see me? What was that all about?' Amitabh asked as his wife looked at him with horror in his eyes.

'I just ... It was just ... for one moment. But it passed. I was not going to do it ... I just ...'

'What if you had? What if that moment had not passed? What if you had taken the pills before the moment passed?'

'But I did not! And things are better now. I am okay. I really am ... You don't have to worry about me,' she said, cringing at the look on Amitabh's face. Amitabh wanted to tell her everything. He wanted her to know that it was him who had the affair and not her mother.

'How was I to know? I could not just assume so. What if you had tried something again? I could not sit here and do nothing. I needed to talk about it to someone.'

'You didn't have to tell her.'

'Who else? Deny it all you want, but she is your mother,' Amitabh said. He sat down on a chair lying nearby, as if unable to stand anymore. 'Had something happened to you, I could not have faced it alone.'

They stayed silent after that. Natasha had tears in her eyes. So did Amitabh. Natasha meant everything for him. After his wife left, his daughter was the only thing that kept him going. It would have killed him to see her go.

I could have saved her. The thought would have haunted him forever.

He would never have been able to forgive himself. He wouldn't have been able to carry on. He was already a failed man with a failed marriage and a daughter he couldn't keep happy.

'Could you leave us alone?' Amitabh looked at Natasha's mother. Natasha's mom left with tears in her eyes.

Amitabh's tears started to trickle down his cheek. He didn't remember the last time he had cried. He was a rock. He was known to be. The smart, business magnate who wasn't fazed by anything.

Natasha went to her dad and bent down on her knees in front of his chair. He looked up and met her eye.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'Did you not think about me even once?' Amitabh asked. The question had haunted him ever since he had spotted the bottle of sleeping pills.

'I did. I'm sorry, Dad. Please ...'

'Don't ever do such a thing again. You have no idea what I went through,' he said, sadly. He had failed as a father. As a husband.

She sniffed. 'I won't. I promise I will never do such a thing again. I don't know why I was going to do it, but ... I would not have. I had thought against it before you came to my room that day ...'

'What made you change your mind?'

'I told you-the moment just kind of passed ... after I got Shreya's call.'

'Is there something you want to tell me?' Amitabh asked.

'It is all okay now, Dad. I am keeping myself away from the things that drove me to that stupid decision.'

He nodded. She got up on her feet.

'Dad ... what did you want to tell me? You and Mom were talking about something now ... ?'

He took a moment to answer that. 'We were talking about her coming back. We want her to shift back here ...'

'In this house? With us? Please tell me it's not like that'

'Listen to me first. There are things that you don't understand. Give it some time and it will make sense to you. She is your mother and she needs you. You need her.'

'But she left ... she never loved me ...' Natasha said softly.

'She came back, didn't she? Can't we try to leave the past behind? Can't we concentrate on what lies ahead of us?'

'Why did she go?'

'I cannot answer that question, not now,' her dad said.

'Then I can't forgive her either.'

'Try to understand, beta. Some things just. . .'he sighed. 'I want her here. You need a mother. I cannot do this alone anymore.'

'You don't need to worry about me.'

'It is not that simple, Natasha. Just think about it, okay? You know she won't shift back unless it's okay with you. We are leaving it up to you.'

She did not say anything. Amitabh wished she would understand and let her mother come back and live with them. He wanted them to be together. He was scared about Natasha. He was seeing her destroy herself.

Finally, her dad said, 'You should go to sleep now.'

'Yeah ... the quiz ...' she mumbled.

'That too. Do well, beta.'

She nodded. 'Is she staying here tonight?' They both knew who she was talking about.

'Yes. For tonight. It's late.'

She nodded again and left for her room. Amitabh stepped into her room late at night. Natasha was sleeping. Like a child. He liked that. Maybe Natasha would understand, after all.

Chapter 16

The First Round

All their preparation for the quiz went down the drain. The questions asked in the first round were as basic as they could be. It seemed like the teachers were only looking for a way to select one group out of so many students. It was a mere formality. Though Natasha thought others might have had a little difficulty in answering the questions.

'Shit. Like really. We studied so much . . .' Natasha said after they handed in their answer sheets.

'Never mind. At least we did fine,' Shreya said.

'Yeah. That's a good thing. I guess we might make it.

'Not if we had left it up to you,' Vicky said from behind them.

They turned around. Natasha and Vicky had had more than one argument in the half hour they had taken to answer the questions. She wanted no more of it. 'Get rid of him,' she said to Shreya and went to stand a little away. She could still hear the conversation.

'I told you it will be aspirin. But you listened to her,' Vicky said.

'What do you mean?' Shreya asked.

'The answer is aspirin. The carboxyl group COOH is in aspirin, not picric acid,' he said. 'And in the cyanide extraction process of silver, the agents are oxygen and zinc!'

'How can you be sure?'

'I just Googled it,' he waved his phone in front of her face. 'If we lose because of her ...'

'Relax. Just a couple of questions. It's hardly going to matter,' Shreya tried to calm him.

'Seriously? Two incorrect answers because of her. There are people who had all

answers correct. We stand no chance.'

'How many answers did we get wrong?'

'Just these two. Both because of her,' he said with gritted teeth.

'Enough, loser. Stop crying like a baby,' Natasha came closer to Vicky and said. 'Why the hell are you so interested in the freaking quiz anyway?'

'Because I studied for it. Unlike you. Chemistry was yours. You were supposed to know, weren't you? Or did you not study inorganic?'

'One wrong answer. Big deal.'

'Two-' he started, but Natasha cut him off.

'You didn't know it either. You were just guessing.'

'I told you it would be oxygen and zinc.'

'Oh please. Let go, okay?. We got two answers incorrect. Just two. So we did very well and we have a very good chance of making it. So, stop fretting,' Shreya intervened.

'Yeah. Buzz off,' Natasha added.

And before he had a chance to say anything else, they turned around and left. It was like old times! Shreya had taken her side, even when she was the one at fault. But that's what best friends do. The thought came to her mind before she could stop it. Her heart skipped a beat for she had a friend after long. Someone who would stand up for her.

When they got out of Vicky's earshot, Shreya said, 'Can I ask you something?'

'Yes?'

'Did you prepare Chemistry for the quiz?'

Natasha chuckled. 'You know, don't you?'

'I thought so, but I was not sure. Tell me. Did you study at all?'

'Yeah. A little. Like-one topic. After that, you asked me to study with you, and we

started Physics. So I didn't get time.'

'But you suggested Physics, I didn't.' Shreya was still a little confused.

'Yes, I did. Because I wanted to know more than Vicky about his subject!'

'Oh! Now I get it.'

'Okay. Enough about the quiz and studies now. I'm bored. Shall we do something?' Natasha asked.

'Eat, probably? I'm starved.'

'Let's go out after the classes are over?' Natasha asked.

'Sure thing.'



The school ended in a bit and they went to eat something at the KFC nearby. They ate, they laughed, and they cribbed about how much they ate. It didn't end there. The very next day, and the day next to it, they found themselves in the corner seat of the KFC outlet. It had started to become a routine. A week passed and things were changing drastically.

Natasha's life was no longer about sadness and revenge. It was about little chicken burgers and movies after school. She didn't forget anything. But other things started to take a backseat. She was happy.

And even though Natasha loved every minute she spent with Shreya, there was a constant fear at the back of her head. What if Shreya found out about the magazines? What if she never forgave her and never talked to her again? She was afraid that the truth would ruin their newly rekindled friendship.

But she could not keep it a secret anymore either. Shreya had always been good to her. She deserved the truth. Natasha felt something that she had not felt before guilt. And it was not the usual tinge. It was a constant and jab. She hated to have caused so much

pain and humiliation to Shreya once upon a time, for her own selfish motives. And she hated to keep it a secret anymore. But she was scared.

After thinking long and hard, she decided to tell Shreya all about it. She would lay it all out in the open and she would apologize. Then, she would hope that Shreya forgave her. She knew it was too much to ask of anybody, but she could not help it. She needed her too much.



Exactly a week after the first round of the quiz was held, the results were out. One team from every section. Natasha crossed her fingers. One team, out of so many.

She was not scared of Vicky, but she did not want another argument with him. 'Two incorrect answers ... if we lose because of her ...' Phew. She could not stand that guy at all. She did not relish the thought of her team losing in the first round itself, because of those two answers. The names of the four selected teams were up on the noticeboard. Everyone rushed to check if they had made it, but Natasha hung back.

'What? Let's go!' Shreya said.

'No. You check and tell me?' Natasha suggested.

'Are you nervous?' Shreya looked surprised.

I just want us to make it. Now go!"

They had made it ... to the second round. And they had done it in style.

Chapter 17

The Misunderstanding

Ananya looked at Yuvraj. He had been acting weird since the last few days. She had a feeling that something was wrong, and she asked him about it more than once, but he just did not tell her. She was getting concerned about him. She had no idea what had been bothering him.

'So, are you excited about it?' she asked.

'The quiz? No, not really,' Yuvraj replied without taking his eyes off the road. They were driving back home from school. Yuvraj came from a family of hardworking parents. Both IITians and both from the IIMs. Yuvraj always had money, though he never abused it. He used the school bus on most occasions.

'Why? We are entering the second round. I think that's exciting.'

'Hmm.'

'Do you know who are selected from the other three sections?' Ananya asked.

'No.'

'Why are you acting like this? Could you please tell me?' she asked for the zillionth time.

'Acting like what? I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Please, Yuvraj? Don't be like this. Tell me what's wrong?'

'Nothing is wrong. I've already told you,' he said, with his eyes still set on the road.

They did not speak after that. When Ananya got home, she kept feeling a little disgruntled. She wanted to know what was bothering Yuvraj. She could not bear to see him that sad. For the last few days, he had seemed lost in some other world. Even on the day of the quiz, he had only answered the questions he knew. No discussions. He was

barely even speaking anymore.

Ananya and Yuvraj's relationship was perfect. Cute times spent in the last seat of the class, scribbling on notebooks, long late-night chats on the phone. Everything was straight out the fairy tales. The only few times that they had fought was over Rishab. Ananya loved Yuvraj. And though Yuvraj knew that, he was always very insecure about Ananya talking to Rishab.

Ananya was restless. She had to talk to Yuvraj.

A little while later, she dropped Yuvraj a text message.

Ananya: Can we talk?

Yuvraj: Yes?

Ananya: Will you tell me what's wrong?

Yuvraj: Nothing is.

Ananya: Quit it, Yuvraj. I need to know. Please.

Five minutes later, she got a call from him.

'Hi.'

'Yuvraj ... tell me, please? What is it about?' she pleaded.

'Rishab,' he replied shortly.

'Rishab? What do you mean? What happened?'

'Don't act as if you do not know anything. We both know what is going on.'

'No! I do not know what is going on. I do not have any idea what you are talking about,' she said, shocked.

'Don't act innocent. Just tell me-since when has it been going on?'

'Since when has what been going on? What are you saying, Yuvraj?'

'I'm asking-since when have you been meeting Rishab without telling me?' he shouted at her.

'What? You think ... you think I'm ... cheating on you . . . ?' Ananya was speechless. She had not been expecting that at all.

'I don't think you are cheating on me. I know you're meeting him without telling me. What do I make of it?'

'Where is this coming from? Why do you think I'm ... ? Don't you trust me?' her voice trailed away.

'Oh, stop it already! And be honest.'

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything. What. Why. When. Where. I want to know everything about it. How many times have you met him?' Yuvraj asked.

'You don't want to know the if of it?'

All I know is that Natasha saw you and Rishab on your date. And I know she could have been lying, but I know she was not. I can tell her truths and lies apart.'

'She said that she saw us together and you just assumed that we were on a date? That I have met him before, too, and not let you know?' Ananya asked.

'Why the secrecy? Why didn't you tell me? What's there to hide?'

'Because I didn't get a chance to tell you the day after my 'date' with Rishab. That day, Natasha saw us in the library . . . and since then, nothing has been the same. You have been in this weird mood ... I did not want to bother you.'

'Then ... it was not a date?' he asked.

Ananya stayed silent.

'Tell me it was not! That's all I want to know!' Yuvraj prodded. His tone changed. Ananya knew that he had realized that he was wrong.

'Your distrust is insulting,' she said shortly.

'I'm sorry, baby! I trust you. I do. But when Natasha ...'

'You believed in what she had to say. You did not even feel the need to ask me once.' These were statements. Her tone was not questioning. She felt cheated; she was giving her all in their relationship, and he trusted her so little?

She had tears in her eyes. She had been worried about Yuvraj . . . when in all that time, he had been thinking that she was cheating on him. She was hurt. She didn't want to talk to him. She hung up and threw her phone on the bed.

He called her as soon as she hung up. But she did not take his calls. She was in no condition to talk. She needed some time to herself. But when she saw the phone ringing, she just could not not receive the call. It was after all Yuvraj ... she could never be mad at him for long. She realised that.

She took his call.

'Hello? Ananya? Ananya, are you there?' he asked frantically.

'Yes,' she sniffed.

'I'm so sorry, baby. I never meant to hurt you ...I

'I know'

'Please don't cry. I'm really sorry. Am I forgiven?' he asked.

'Do you trust me?'

'Yes. Yes, I do. I trust you completely. It was stupid of me not to ask you about it, I know. I just ...'

'What? Why did you not ask me about it?' Ananya asked.

'I wanted to. But I did not like it that you met him and kept it from me. I wanted you to tell me about it yourself.'

'I was going to! But you seem so stressed already-'

'I know. I know. I realize that it is my fault. And I promise it'll never happen again. I trust you. And I love you ... will always do. Am I forgiven now?' Yuvraj asked.

'Hmm,' she replied softly.

'Cool. So, that done, tell me-how soon can you meet me?'

Now?,

'Yes, now! I need you. I have been missing you,' he said.

'Why should I care? I was right there with you all the time. You were too busy doubting me!'

'I know. Stupid me. But I said sorry. And you said I'm forgiven. So a make-out should follow, right? Make up make out?'

'Pervert,' Ananya laughed. They bantered around like that for a while. She was relieved that things were back to normal. She then told him about what had happened with Rishab. She could tell that he was relieved that she did not have anything for Rishab. He must have been stressed about it. It was not the first time there had been a rift between them because of Rishab. She hoped Rishab would just understand how things stood. That she loved Yuvraj more than anything else in the world. The last few days had been really tough on her.

She wished Natasha would not cause any more trouble.

Chapter 18

The Threat

It had been three days Natasha had been holding on to the video from the surveillance tapes of the library. The security guard still thought she was the Head Girl and gave it to her. It clearly showed Ananya and Yuvraj kissing and making out. Clear enough to get both of them expelled and humiliated in front of their parents.

All she had to was to mention the date and the time of the video to the school authorities. It would be the school authorities' job to get the video. But she wanted to leverage the video and torture Ananya a little bit. She had not decided if she would eventually get them expelled, but she wanted to play around and make Ananya and Yuvraj's lives hell.

'Hey Ananya! Long time, no see?' Natasha called from across the canteen when she spotted Ananya.

'What do you want, Natasha?' Ananya asked.

'You know what I want. And I found a way to get it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I would like to talk about it alone,' Natasha said and looked meaningfully at all the people around them.

'What is it?' Ananya asked when they had moved away from the rest. The slight fear in her face made Natasha happy.

'Take a wild guess,' Natasha said. She liked playing around with Ananya. She did not get many chances at it and she wanted to make the most of it. She was feeling good about it. Being on top, controlling things. Something she had always done in the past.

'Well, tell me quickly. I have work to do,' Ananya said, clearly irritated.

'Oh really? Like what? Going back to your boyfriend? And dragging him to that dark aisle in the library? And then ... ?'

'It's none of your business.'

'But what if I decided to make it my business?' Natasha said.

'What do you mean?' Ananya asked stiffly.

'You know, I was just wondering-does the security camera near your lovers' spot work? What do you think?'

From the look on Ananya's face, Natasha could tell that she had hit the bull's eye. Still, she did not say anything. She wanted Ananya to ask. She wanted to hear the fear in her voice and to see it in her eyes. Natasha relished Ananya's pain.

'What are you getting at?' Ananya asked.

'Exactly what you are thinking. What did you expect? That I would let it go? After all you have done to me?'

'What did I-'

'I don't know how it happened, but I am sure my removal from the post of Head Girl and from the Debating Club has something to do with you. But let's not waste our time in futile conversations about the past. Let's talk about what would happen if I leak those videos to the public, say ... tomorrow?' Natasha said.

'You would do no such thing.'

'I won't? And who would stop me?'

'Natasha, whatever it is, it's between you and me. Let's keep Yuvraj out of it. Please do not do anything that affects him?' Ananya pleaded. She knew that if Yuvraj's reputation was ruined again, he would be removed from the post of the president of the Debating Club-and that was the least of all the repercussions. She did not want that to happen. She didn't want anything to happen to him.

'Don't give me that crap.'

'It's not crap. And you know it. Why are you doing this?'

'To get back at you. Weren't you listening to me all this while? Let me repeat it for

you you ruined my life. I will ruin yours. As simple as that,' Natasha said, an evil grin stretched across her face.

'But it's between you and me. Why drag Yuvraj into it?'

'Added bonus. I hate him as much as I hate you.'

'Please don't. I love him . . . ' Ananya said, more to herself. The look on her face was pitiable.

Natasha was struck by the look on Ananya's face. The feeling of revenge faded away a little. The fun dried up. That made Natasha feel bad about herself.

There was pure pain on Ananya's face, just knowing that something somehow was going to hurt Yuvraj. She had never pleaded in front of Natasha, but she was doing that now And you just had to take one look at her face when she was talking about Yuvraj ... there would be no doubt about how deeply she was in love with the guy. It showed.

Natasha was thrown for a moment. Her thoughts went back to Rana. She had loved him the way Ananya loved Yuvraj. But she had not been as lucky as Ananya. She had made mistakes. And she was paying for them. By making others ache too, she was trying to find refuge.

She wasn't succeeding. She realized that she was not the same person anymore. She was not capable of destroying people and being happy about it anymore. She had changed. She couldn't go through with it.

'Please, Natasha? Can't we talk about this?' Ananya's voice brought her back to the present.

'I'll ... I'll think about it,' she replied in a polite tone. The kind of tone she used while talking to Shreya. She did not understand what was happening to her. She turned around and walked out of the canteen. Her head was spinning.

'Natasha?' she heard Shreya call her.

'Yes?' she said, spotting her.

'Where were you? I have been looking for you all over!'

'Me? Why?'

'To have lunch. And we need to do something about the second round of the quiz too. I still can't believe we made it,' Shreya said excitedly. 'Anyway, let's go! Only five minutes left of lunchtime.'

Chapter 19

The Second Round

‘W here's Dad?’ Natasha asked one of the maids.

He has gone out with Madam,' she replied.

Madam?’

‘Your mother ...’

‘Oh.’

Her head was still dizzy from the short rendezvous with Ananya. One moment, she wanted to destroy her. .. the next, she wanted to forgive her. She lay back on the bed and tried to push out the thoughts from her head.

She looked around her room. She was bored. Her dad was out with her mother. She wondered what exactly was going on. She wondered why her dad was so confident that she would understand. She wondered why her dad was not angry with her, while she was.

He could probably forgive her and move on. But Natasha could not afford to give her mother a second chance. She did not want to open up to her and give her any kind of power over her. She hated being vulnerable. All her insecurities were because of that very woman, in the first place. She remembered how she had felt, years ago when her mother left home. She had been shattered. She had been haunted by her insecurities, which had developed as a result of her mother's leaving her. If her own mother did not love her enough to stay ...

It had been a huge blow to her self-worth. She had started to drown in the misery of her mother's betrayal, along with her own guilt.

She pushed these thoughts out of her mind and called up Shreya.

‘Hello?’ Shreya said.

'Hi Shreya. What's up?' Natasha asked.

'Just going out with cousins for shopping. What about you?'

'Nothing. I was getting bored, so I thought we could hang out ...'

'Oh. I ... Why don't you join us? We will have fun!' Shreya proposed.

'No, no. You carry on. I'll catch you later.'

'Are you sure? We don't mind. It's just three of us. We'd love to have you.'

'Yes, I am sure. Carry on. I'll talk to you later,' Natasha said.

Alright. Bye.'

After they hung up, Natasha looked around her room. She thought of picking up her books and studying. They had the second round of their quiz the next day. But she simply did not have any strength left. The course books were not helping in the quiz questions anyway. Finally, she switched on the television. There was nothing watchable on, as usual. But she had no other option. The advertisements were entertaining.

She slept off.



The quiz was supposed to be held in the school auditorium. The audience consisted only of the students of the twelfth grade-the science sections and a few teachers. There were four desks arranged on the stage, under bright lights. It was going to be a small event. No one, apart from the selected teams and some of their friends, had any interest in the whole thing. The students in the audience were literally yawning. They had not made the cut. They were not really interested in knowing which team would make it.

Until Natasha came on the stage. And then ... all eyes turned to her. She felt like everyone around her expected another scene wherever she went. They looked for free entertainment. It was like she was on display, and everyone was waiting with bated breath for something scandalous to happen. She went up to the stage and chose a corner seat at the table they were assigned. Shreya sat next to her.

'Where's Vicky?' Shreya asked.

'You are asking me?' Natasha made a face.

'Oh, right. But seriously ... where is he? We are starting in fifteen minutes and he is still not here.'

'You and I are enough, aren't we?'

'Yes, we are. But they won't let us participate if we do not have a team,' Shreya panicked.

'Relax. He will be here. He seemed mighty concerned the last time I got a couple of answers wrong. I am sure he won't miss this.'

'Yes, but that might have been because he found something against you. I don't think he genuinely cares.'

'What can we do? You have his phone number, right?' Natasha asked, remembering that Shreya had exchanged numbers with both of them the day the teams had been announced.

'Yes, but ... I can't call him from here,' Shreya replied. They were on the stage and they were not allowed cell phones in school. Yes, every student carried one, and every teacher knew about it. But they didn't dare take them out in front of the teachers.

'I'll call him,' Natasha said, taking Shreya's phone and leaving the stage. Backstage, she kept ringing him constantly with no response. Finally, after four missed calls, he took her call.

'I'm coming, I'm coming. I am just getting there. And listen, Shreya-no matter how much Natasha forces you to, don't let it start without me,' Vicky said frantically. It sounded like he was running.

'This is Natasha, jerk,' Natasha gritted her teeth.

'Oh. The queen herself! I must say, I'm honoured by your call. How may I be of help?' he mocked.

'By gracing us with your presence, maybe?'

'Oh, that. I thought you were in a mood to get naughty backstage before the quiz started. I'm sorry, but I really do not have time for it. Would after the quiz suit you?' Vicky said.

'Shut up, jackass. Just come. Now.'

'Whoa! I like the authority. Now. Quite turning on-'

And before he could say anymore, she hung up. That guy really rubbed her the wrong way. She went back to the stage and took her seat.

'Is he coming?' Shreya asked.

'In a minute,' Natasha replied. And please ask him to just keep shut the whole time. I don't want another scene.'

'Why? Did he say something?'

'Like always. But seriously, I will hit him the next time, and it won't be a pretty sight.'

Shreya suddenly burst out laughing. A few people turned to look at them and she tried to control her laughter. 'What?' Natasha whispered.

'The look on your face! And the ... the ferocity with which you said it ...' Shreya said, still struggling to control her laughter.

'Whatever,' Natasha said, but she had a reluctant smile on her face, which soon got converted into a bigger smile, followed with a full-fledged laugh.

Vicky got there just in time. 'I am here. Because you missed me so much. Now, how about the after the quiz ... ?'

'Another word ... and I will break your nose,' Natasha threatened. But she could not hold on to the ferocious expression on her face. It was ruined by Shreya giggling madly, right next to her. She joined in. Vicky looked baffled.

'What? What? Why are you laughing? What's so funny?' he kept asking again and again. But they were too busy to reply. It was not that funny, they knew. But there was something about bugging Vicky that made them laugh even more.

Soon, the quiz started and they all put on their serious faces. Out of the other three teams, one had Ananya, Yuvraj and Naman. Natasha wanted to win more than anything she had ever wanted in her life. The questions, again, were basic. And they did a good job. When it was time for the last round, the scores of Natasha's and Ananya's teams were tied. The other two teams lagged behind. The competition was one-on-one. And both Natasha and Ananya wanted to win very badly. Getting to the final round was not their only aim. Not letting the other person win was what drove them more. Or so it was for Natasha, at least.

Only three questions to go. Heartbeats started to rise. The next question was for them.

'The shape of XeO_2F_2 molecule is

(A) trigonal bipyramidal

(B) square planar

(C) tetrahedral

(D) see saw,' they were asked.

'B?' Vicky suggested softly.

'D,' Natasha and Shreya echoed in the microphone.

'D. That's the right answer. Section A-35 points,' the host announced.

Yes! Natasha kept her fingers crossed. She did not pay attention to the questions that were asked to sections B and C. She only cared about section D, Ananya's section.

Their question was, 'As per IUPAC nomenclature, the name of the complex $[\text{Co}(\text{NH}_3)_2[\text{H}_2\text{O}]_4]\text{Cl}_3$ is

(A) Tetraaquadiaminecobalt (III) chloride,

(B) Tetraaquadiaminecobalt (III) chloride,

(C) Diaminetetraaquacobalt (III) chloride or

(D) Diamminetetraaquacobalt (III) chloride?'

'It's D,' she heard Yuvraj say in a clear voice.

'And D is the right answer. Section D-35 points! Next question, section A- A thin uniform cylinder shell, closed at both ends is partially filled with water. It is floating vertically in water in a half-submerged state. If c is the relative density of the material of the shell with respect to water, then the correct statement is that the shell is

(A) more than half-filled if c is less than 0.5,

(B) more than half-filled if c is less than 1.0,

(C) half-filled if c is more than 0.5 or

(D) less than half-filled if c is less than 0.5?'

'A,' all three of them answered together. Their teachers had taken the whole thing a bit too lightly. The questions were a mere joke.

'That's the right answer. Section A-40 points.'

The next question to section D was, 'Two solid cylinders P and Q of same mass and same radius start rolling down a fixed inclined plane from the same height at the same time. Cylinder P has most of its mass concentrated near its surface, while Q has most of its mass concentrated near the axis. Which statement(s) is (are) correct?

(A) Both cylinders P and Q reach the ground at the same time,

(B) Cylinder P has a larger linear acceleration than cylinder Q,

(C) Cylinder Q reaches the ground with a larger angular speed or

(D) Both cylinders reach the ground with same translational kinetic energy?'

The three of them discussed it for a short moment before Ananya said unsurely, 'Is it A?'

'No. It's the wrong answer. The right answer is C. Section D-35 points. And the last question to section A is-Among the following compounds, the most acidic is

(A) p-nitrophenol,

(B) p-hydroxybenzoic acid,

(C) o-hydroxybenzoic acid or

(D) p-toluic acid?'

'C, right?' Vicky whispered.

'I have no idea,' Natasha said. 'But toluic acid seems right ...'

'No! It's C,' Shreya said.

'It's D, I think,' Natasha turned to Vicky and asked.

He shook his head, half in shock that Natasha had just directed a no-sarcasm, no-slang sentence to him.

'Trust me, I know,' she said confidently into the microphone. They crossed their fingers. If they got that answer right, they would win. Natasha bit her lip.

There was a dramatic pause after which it was announced, And that's the right answer. With that, section A wins!'

They did not bother with asking the last questions from sections B, C and D. Natasha sat still for a second as she played it in her head-section A wins! She looked up to see how section D was doing. The look on their faces was all the satisfaction she needed. She looked away and turned to her own team. They cheered, and Natasha hugged Shreya. 'Wow, Shreya! That was good.'

Shreya blushed.

They all laughed. There was a brief awkward moment between Natasha and Vicky. They settled for a stiff handshake, in the end.

Chapter 20

The Confession

They were thrilled. They had made it to the final round of the quiz and the euphoria simply did not fade for the next few days. They decided to celebrate. The occasion definitely called for it.

'So, it's done, then? I'll reserve three seats ...' Shreya said.

'Three? It's just the two of us, right?' Natasha asked.

'Why? Vicky is coming. He just called to confirm. He cancelled all his plans to come with us ...'

Are you kidding me?' Natasha let out. She almost dropped the phone in shock. Shreya invited Vicky?

'Yes, I'm kidding you,' Shreya laughed.

Natasha let out a sigh of relief. In the days that had followed the second round of the quiz, they had developed a deeper bond between them. Even though they did not realise it, they had been practically inseparable. They were back to being best friends. Shreya had started to ignore her friends unknowingly. Natasha did not have any friends anyway. They started to hang out together in their free time.

But there was something bothering Natasha. The guilt. She had been feeling it for some time then, and she finally decided what she had to do. It was inevitable. There was no way around it. She just had to tell Shreya the truth. Whenever Shreya looked at her, without an iota of distrust, Natasha felt guilty. She had been ignoring the feeling and procrastinating what she had to do for long now.

She knew that there was a very good chance that she would lose Shreya forever if she told her the truth. But she was willing to take the risk. That was better than withholding the truth from her any longer.

She called her back as soon as they hung up.

'Hello?' Shreya said.

'Shreya, I need to talk to you about something.'

'Yes, say?'

'It's kind of ... important. Can I come over?' Natasha asked.

'Now? But what about our plans?'

'We can postpone it till the evening, right?'

'Okay. Come over, then,' Shreya said and hung up.

Half an hour later, Natasha found herself in Shreya's bedroom. Shreya was sitting on her bed, looking at her. And Natasha was at a loss for words. She suddenly just could not speak. She had a bad feeling about this. Back at home, when she thought about it, telling the truth had seemed like a very good idea. The only option. The right thing to do. It had not felt so scary then. But when she was standing right in front of Shreya, who was waiting for her to speak, she was scared out of her wits.

She simply could not do it.

'What is it? You are scaring me now . . .' Shreya said.

'I ... I have a confession to make . . .' Natasha started.

'Yes, Natasha. Please say whatever you want to say quickly. This is getting a bit scary now.'

'Okay. But ... I know it is a big thing to ask for, but please do not judge me by what I say next ...'

'Would you please just say it?' Shreya asked. She was visibly getting anxious about the whole thing.

'I wanted to tell you, that ... it was I who put those magazines in your bag. And then, in school, I told everyone that your parents found those magazines in your bag. And that I would no longer be friends with you because I thought that you were gross. It was me. It was all because of me,' Natasha said it all together. And then, very slowly, she raised

her head to look at Shreya's expression.

She would never forget Shreya's face as she said that.

Shreya looked like she had seen a ghost. All those years, she had held Natasha in high regard. She had never, for once, suspected her involvement in all that had happened. Any other person would have realized. It was so transparent. But Shreya had never doubted Natasha. Only to find out all these years later, that she was the very person behind all that had gone wrong in her life.

She had been sad when everybody started to treat her like an untouchable at school. But she stopped caring about them. All she wanted to know was that Natasha believed her. That Natasha knew that Shreya would never do such a thing. And here she was, finding out that all the while, it was Natasha behind the whole incident.

Shreya was broken. Natasha could not bear to look at her face anymore.

'I am sorry, Shreya. I know how wrong it was of me to do it . . . but I don't even know why I did it. Maybe because everyone loved you so much ... and hated me. I did not like that. Especially ... Mom. She was so fond of you ... she even asked me to learn something from you. You are so soft-spoken ... and she wanted me to be so too. But I did not. And she left me ... In some way, I hated you for it. I blamed you for everything ...'

Shreya did not say anything. The first drops of tears trickled down her face. Natasha continued. She had no idea what else she could do.

'Mom left me. And you were there ... the living example of what my mom wanted me to be like. I felt like it was my fault that she left. That if I was more like you, she would have loved me. And so, she would not have left me. But I failed. I could not be like you. You are perfect. So I had to make you a little imperfect ...'

Shreya still did not say anything. Her sobs were getting a little harder and louder. Natasha's tears made their presence felt too. She said, 'I realised later that it was a heinous thing to do, but the harm was done. I had already done it all. But if it is any consolation-I regret it deeply. I now realize how big a deal it must have been, for your parents to find hidden dirty magazines in your bag. You must have had a very difficult time because of that.'

Shreya suddenly started to cry like a baby. Her sobs got a little uncontrollable.

Natasha panicked. 'But I am sorry, Shreya. I was a mean person. And what I did was in no way justified. I know that I have hurt you, but I promise you that it will never happen again. I know I do not deserve to be forgiven, but I hope that you ...'

Shreya sniffed in. She said meekly, 'Get out.'

'What?'

'Get out of here, Natasha. Leave me alone.'

'I'm sorry for what I did, Shreya. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I'll ... look forward to talking to you . . .' Natasha whispered, a little scared.

justgo.'



For the next few hours, Natasha was unsettled and disturbed. She could do practically nothing. Her whole world was hanging by a thread. It's amazing how everything seems so completely worthless without some special people in your life. Like what guys do when they are in a relationship. They love her, and she loves them. That is settled. But they don't give her enough time. Work is also important. They prefer hanging around with their guy friends to catch a soccer match. Guys' night outs and endless bottles of beers seem more interesting.

But if she leaves ... they don't feel like working. They simply cannot concentrate. Soccer seems like the stupidest thing on the planet. What is so awesome in watching a bunch of guys in red half pants and another bunch of guys in yellow half pants run around a field, for a ball? What is the whole sense of seeing the ball being kicked into a net-covered goal post? And of drinking beer?

Some people give meaning to our lives. Without them, nothing seems okay. Life seems useless. It does not really make sense at all times. And it is not supposed to. The matters of the heart are way too twisted.

Natasha was amazed by how quickly Shreya had become such an integral part of her life. She could not imagine what would happen to her if Shreya decided not to forgive

her ever. She was shaking. The thought of ending things with her for the second time, and forever, gave her the shivers.

She sat holding her phone, her tear-filled eyes fixed on its display. But the phone never rang. She could not sleep that night. She just kept changing positions, wondering what the next day would bring. She cried through the night. She was sad, she was angry and she was frustrated.

When she entered her classroom, her eyes automatically went to Shreya's seat. She was not there. That was hardly surprising. Natasha had not expected her to come. She had gone to school just in case Shreya came. But she didn't. Her day was a waste. When the school ended, she made her way to her car. There, in the parking lot, she saw him. Rana.

He was standing there with a few other guys-Yuvraj, Naman and Rishab. What surprised her more was her own reaction to seeing Rana. She felt ... nothing. Not sadness, not regret, nothing. To her, he looked like just another guy. He did not even seem hot to her anymore.

Rana, at best, was okay-looking. He had an average built, average looks and average appeal. And a rotten heart, she had gotten to know by personal experience. But to Natasha, he had once been better than Brad Pitt. She had thought that she loved him. But when she saw him then, she realized that what she had mistaken as love was just another fleeting emotion of attraction.

She would not have felt nothing had she loved him even a teeny bit. She smiled to herself and went to her car. Without sparing him a second glance, she left the school campus. He did not deserve even a glance. He had put her call on loudspeaker, in front of zillions of his friends. He deserved nothing.

Chapter 21

Best Friend Forever

Natasha was still sleeping when there was a knock on her room's door. 'Come in,' she called, thinking that it must be the maid. She turned to the other side and shut her eyes again. It had been a long night of tossing and turning. She had finally fallen asleep at the break of dawn. She was in no mood to wake up yet.

'Wake up,' she heard Shreya's voice say. As soon as she realized that it was Shreya, she sat up on her bed with a jump.

'You? I, uh ... Hi ... Shreya,' Natasha said. She could not believe what she was seeing. In the depths of the night, she had convinced herself that it was over between them. When sleep was out of question, and she kept changing positions in her bed, she realized how difficult it would be for anyone to forgive and forget after that level of betrayal. Had it been the other way round, Natasha would never have been able to do that.

But it was Shreya. And her being in Natasha's room the next morning could only mean good news. Natasha's heart soared. The feeling of helplessness, of misery that she had felt the previous night finally left. She looked at Shreya with hope. But Shreya was acting weird. She acted as if Natasha had never confessed anything and as if things were the same as they had been the day before. It increased Natasha's anticipation.

'Hi. These weren't here the last time, were they?' Shreya looked around the room, at the pictures covering the wall and the table tops. Natasha had repositioned them to more prominent places. It reminded her that she had a friend.

'Uh, yes . . . they were. I just repositioned them.' Natasha said.

'You did? Why?' Shreya asked innocently.

'Just ... felt like. No reason.'

'You need to be honest with me, Natasha. You cannot answer a question as simple as that truthfully?'

'I just wanted them there. They make me happy. They make me think about you and that brings a smile to my face. I wanted you around even when you weren't,' Natasha said in a rush.

'Hmm,' Shreya seemed to think about it for a minute before asking. 'You wanted me around?'

'You are the only true friend I ever had. You are the only person who genuinely cared about me. I know what I did was really shitty, but ... I just hope that you can forgive me. Because it's you. You are the only person I can expect forgiveness from, even after doing all that to you. No one else is so sweet.'

Shreya went ahead and hugged Natasha wordlessly. But not before Natasha noticed a sheen of tears in her eyes. Natasha hugged her back, still not daring to believe that it was actually happening. 'Does this ... does this mean that I am forgiven?' she asked meekly.

Shreya pulled back to look at Natasha and said, 'Only if you promise to be truthful to me always. No matter what it is, you have to tell me everything. No lies. No secrets. And we will be back to being best friends.'

'I promise. Whatever you want. I will never lie to you. And I will tell you everything.'

And there were no tears. They spent the day at Natasha's place, catching up. They had loads to talk about. They lost track of time. It was when Natasha's phone started to ring that they looked up.

'Crap. Look at the time! I have to go home,' Shreya exclaimed.

'Shut up. You are not going anywhere yet,' Natasha said and rushed to fetch her phone. 'Dad.' She knew it would be bad news. Recently, every conversation she had with her Dad revolved around one topic-her mother. She picked it up.



'Why are you so lost?' Shreya asked her the next day at school.

'Huh?' Natasha said, coming out of her parallel world.

'Why are you so lost?'

'I'm just concentrating on the lecture.'

Shreya gave her a look and did not speak to her for the rest of the class. Natasha kept concentrating on the lecture.



'You know you have to tell me sometime, don't you?' Shreya said. Two classes had passed and Natasha was still acting weird. All through lunchtime, she had played with the food on her plate, eating like a bird. Shreya was getting concerned.

'It's nothing,' Natasha said.

'I will pick my plate and leave right now if you don't tell. We had a rule, remember? You can't keep secrets from me.'

'I don't think you will understand ...'

'I might. Just tell me,' Shreya said.

'My mother wants to move back with us. She suddenly says that she loves us and misses us, and that it was her fault. That she never should have left. She is asking me to forgive her and forget everything. Because she loves me and cares about me. She wants to be my mom again.'

'So ... isn't that a good thing?'

'Are you crazy? She is bluffing! I don't know why she wants to come back. . .' Natasha said. She was angry. Her eyebrows were creased.

'Do you think there is an ulterior motive?'

'Because there has to be. Why would she want to come back otherwise?'

'Maybe she is telling the truth? Maybe she does realize her fault and wants to come back?' Shreya suggested softly.

'She does not. Trust me. Had she loved me, she would not have left me, in the first place.'

'Maybe she realizes her mistake now. That's what she said, didn't she? Maybe that's true. She wants to set things right and she wants your forgiveness.'

'Forgiveness? After what she did to me? How can I forgive her?' Natasha let out.

'Like I forgave you,' Shreya said gently.

'But I am not you. I cannot forgive her. I cannot forget. I do not have that big a heart.'

'You can at least try.'

'I don't want to try. I do not want to open myself to hurt again. I can't show that I still care. She would just take advantage of my vulnerability again,' Natasha said.

'But you still care?'

,of course, I still care! She is my mother. Tell me how to not care?'

'Then give her a chance. Talk to her and let her explain herself once,' Shreya suggested.

'I don't want to meet her. Dad called yesterday to say the same thing. Meet her. Apparently, she wants to talk to me. As if I would ever-'

'Meet her. Give her a chance. She left you once, she regrets it and she wants to come back. I don't see anything wrong with giving her a chance.'

'That's not all, Shreya . . . You don't know the real reason ... You don't know why she left. ..' Natasha said.

'Tell me.'

'I think there was another man. I think she was having an affair,' Natasha said with her eyes lowered. She was ashamed for a moment.

'Why do you think ... ?' Shreya asked quietly.

'I heard Dad talk to her on phone once, a little while after she left ... I could hear just

his end of the conversation. And I gathered ... Dad would never tell me.'

'Did you ask her?'

'No. I asked Dad. He did not tell me. He said he could not answer that question,' Natasha said.

They did not discuss it anymore. Soon, the bell rang and they went back to class. Shreya kept shooting concerned looks at Natasha all through the lectures. Even though Natasha was not in a good mood, she felt nice. Someone cared. School ended, but Natasha still had a rotten look on her face.

'Let it go, Natasha. Stop thinking about it now,' Shreya said.

'I am trying. But I just can't seem to get it out of my head.'

'Distraction! We have two days left for the final round of the quiz. We practically do not have any time for anything else.'

'Oh, yes. The quiz,' Natasha said. She had forgotten all about the quiz. Her aim was beating Ananya and her team. That done, she was not interested in the whole thing anymore.

'Why don't you sound interested about it?' Shreya asked.

'Because I am not. It's a stupid quiz. There is nothing interesting in it.'

'Listen to yourself? This is not just any stupid quiz. Didn't you see how badly everyone in class tried for it? This is a big deal,' Shreya said. 'I mean, even if we lose, we get a participation certificate from IIT. That's a big deal in itself.'

'I think I will be happy with just the participation certificate. We do not need to actually win.'

'But I want to! We need to try our best. Not everyone gets such a chance.'

'Whatever. I am not going to study for it anymore. I'm done,' Natasha said. But nothing could quench Shreya's excitement. She was thrilled about it. Initially, right after they had won the second round, Natasha was thrilled too. But it had more to do with the fact of Ananya's loss rather than her own win.

As Shreya rattled on about the quiz, Natasha looked around. They were in the school parking lot by then. Something caught her eye-at the other end, she saw Ananya standing with Yuvraj and Rishab. They seemed immersed in conversation. That confused Natasha. After everything, Rishab and Yuvraj were still friends. How?

Just then, Ananya looked up and saw Natasha and Shreya. Natasha turned away and made her way to her car. But Ananya came up to her and called from behind.

'Natasha! Can I talk to you for a minute?' she said.

Natasha and Shreya stopped and turned around to face her.

'Hi, Shreya,' Ananya said.

'Hi, Ananya. What's up?' Shreya said.

'Actually, I needed to talk to Natasha in private for a minute. Do you mind ... ?'

'I mind,' Natasha interjected. 'Shreya is not going anywhere. Say whatever you want to say in front of her.'

'Oh ... okay,' Ananya said and looked a bit uncomfortable. 'I just wanted to say ... about what we talked about, the other day ...'

'The videos? Yes, I remember. What about them?' Natasha asked.

'Things have been a little strained between me and Yuvraj already-'

'Why? Did he find about you planning to cheat on him?'

'Would you just stop? I know you fed Yuvraj a story about me and Rishab the other day. And I'm sure you'd like to know-that caused a lot of problems,' Ananya said.

'You're right. That definitely makes me happy.'

'But you were wrong. It was nothing like that. It's not like that between me and Rishab.'

'Then what is it like?' Natasha asked.

'He still has feelings for me. But that's sorted now too. He understands what I have

for Yuvraj.'

'Aww! How sweet,' Natasha mocked.

'Natasha, I would really appreciate it if you do not cause any further trouble.'

'I don't care about what you appreciate and what you don't. Your story was really touching, but I have had enough. Ciao.'

With that, Natasha turned around and left. Ananya did not try to stop her. Natasha understood what kind of a blow it must have been to Ananya's ego to have approached her in the first place. And that was probably all she could do. Her self-respect would not let her bend in front of Natasha again and again.

'What was that all about?' Shreya asked.

Natasha sighed. With their no lies, no secrets rule, she knew she had no other option. And she knew Shreya would be against the whole idea. She told her.

'So are you going to ... what are you going to do with the video?' Shreya asked slowly.

'I'll make sure every person in the school sees every second of it. Especially the teachers. I will destroy that girl,' Natasha replied, with untainted loathing in her face.

'Oh my God! No! You are not going to do that! Ananya is a nice girl. Trust me. I know,' Shreya exclaimed.

'Why not?'

'Because I don't want Ananya to end up like me. Imagine what will happen to her if her parents get to know about the video, which they will. Do you want her go through the same thing that I went through?' Shreya looked at Natasha and asked.

'But you were innocent, she is not,' Natasha reasoned, feeling guilty at the same time.

'No one deserves what you will do to her,' Shreya said.

'I will think about it.'

Natasha did not try to reason with her. Their no lies, no secrets rule allowed her to do

something first and tell Shreya about it later. She did not need to tell her what she was going to do before she did it. She was definitely going to do it. Or not. She had still not decided.

Chapter 22

Forgive and Forget

She sat down in her mother's living room and looked around. Everywhere she saw, there was just her face staring back. There were pictures of her everywhere. And they were from all times ... of when she was born till the present. She looked at them. She wondered if it was a ploy to make her believe that she loved her. She steeled her heart for what was to come.

Her dad had been happy she had decided to talk to her mom. He told her that Mom was going to tell her something that she had to believe.

'Your mom will tell you something and it's true. I swear on you and you know I would never lie on my daughter's swear. Please listen to her and believe her. If you find it in your heart to forgive her, and forgive me, we will be thankful. We love you. Please don't hate us,' her dad had said.

Natasha was lost in those words which made no sense to her.

'I'm glad you decided to come,' she heard her mother say from behind. She turned.

'You said you wanted to talk?'

'Yes. Yes, please sit. Do you want anything to eat or-?'

'No, I'm good. Please just get to the point,' Natasha said.

Her mother took a deep breath and started to talk.

'I wanted to apologize for what I did to you. I know it was the worst thing a mother can ever do to her child, and I realize how deeply I hurt you. No wonder you do not trust me at all anymore. But I would appreciate a little consideration. Beta, I am sorry for what I did. And I want to set it right,' her mother said.

'You think it can be set right, do you? It cannot be undone.'

'But can't we forget about it and move on? All I am asking for is a chance ...'

'Dad said you wanted to tell me something? What was that?'

'I don't think I should tell you that.'

'I need to know,' Natasha said, with tears threatening in her eyes. She was scared. But she needed to know

Her mother started to narrate.

She started from the time they were a perfect family. Amitabh, her husband, was an up and rising businessman and she was supportive of his dreams. Natasha was loved and Natasha loved her parents. When Natasha was in seventh grade, Amitabh had an affair with a colleague's wife. He started to spend a lot of time on tours and outside home. Natasha's mom didn't notice anything wrong until very long. Things started to get worse and her mom finally started to suspect Amitabh.

Things got messy and Natasha's mother got to know about it all. No matter how much Amitabh tried to convince Natasha's mom, he couldn't. Broken and betrayed, she left both of them. She knew Natasha loved her father more, so she never told Natasha what happened. She made Amitabh swear that he wouldn't, too.

Natasha had tears in her eyes. So did her mother.

It started to make sense. Natasha felt her heart crushing as the blood drained out. All this time she had hated her mom. She had no idea what she had gone through.

'Come home,' Natasha said simply. She couldn't bear to look at her mom.

Are you ... are you serious? Do you mean it?'

'More than anything. I have one question, Mom,' she said. Her heart was a whirlpool of memories. Good and bad ones.

'What is it?' her mother asked. Her face was a mixture of emotions. Hope, fear, happiness, sadness, confusion.

'Did you not think once what would happen to me if you went?' Natasha asked.

'I did. But I couldn't imagine living with your dad any longer. I didn't want to separate you from him. You were a good daughter. Have always been. I've always been so proud

of you ... you loved him more than you loved me.'

'But I loved you, too, Mom,' she said. The word 'Mom' sounded good on her tongue. She wanted to say it over and over again.

'I am sorry ...' her mother said.

'I understand,' she said.

She had another question to ask, though. 'Did you ever think about me? After you left?'

'Everyday! I regretted it every single day and I thought about you all the time. I missed you. And then, one day, it was too much for me to take. I had to come back. It is hard ... living without family ...'

That was all. She did not need any more explanations. She did not have any more questions. Except ... 'What is this? It looks like a portfolio of my entire life in here. So many pictures. What are they? One from every month of my life?' she asked, looking around the room at her pictures.

Her mom laughed. 'It was your dad's idea. He thought that would break the ice between us.'

'Oh, right. I should have known.' Natasha shook her head.

'I did not expect you to forgive me. It really means the world to me. You mean the world to me. I have let you down before, but I promise that it will never happen again. You are a good daughter ... and I will try to be a good mother.'

'Don't ever say that again, Mom. I love you and I know it's not your fault. I am going to love you so much now. No more loving Dad,' she said and cried out.

'Don't do that to your dad. He is good man. Everyone makes mistakes.'

'But he tore away the most beautiful girl in my life. My MOM.

'Girl?'

'Look at you, Mom. You're one hottie. Next time, I am going to flaunt you at my

Parents Teachers Meeting. Everyone is so going to be bowled over.'

'You're the best daughter one can ever have!' her mom said.

They hugged and hugged and didn't stop hugging.

For the next few hours, they talked. They made up-or at least tried their best to make up-for all the talking they'd missed. Natasha realized that the root of all her problems was her mother's absence. She told her mom everything . . . things that she could have never shared with her dad. Her mother listened and never judged her. She didn't scold her when she said she'd gotten drunk. Her mother didn't reprimand her when she said she had kissed someone. She just nodded and listened. With every minute that passed by, she saw her worries melt away. She felt the feelings of revenge, anger and frustration melt away. Instantly, she forgave everybody in her head. She had a smile on her face even though she was telling her mom what she had gone through and how she had lost everything.

'Mom,' she said, 'I should go now.'

'Now? I want you to stay.'

'No, I am going because I want to kick Dad's ass,' she said angrily.

'Don't say that. He has been through a lot. Don't give him a hard time,' she said.

'I will not. But I am leaving so that you can pack and come home.'

Her mother hugged her. A little later Natasha left with tears in her eyes.



On her way back home, Natasha was in some other world. She had a mother again. Her family was not broken. She wanted her mom to shift back to their place at the earliest. Her excitement about it was almost embarrassing. To think that it was the same woman she had pledged to hate for life until the previous day.

She had done what Shreya would have wanted . . . forgiven and forgotten. After she got back home, she was too excited to sit still and do nothing. Her mom was coming

back home! She was jumping with happiness. She called Shreya.

'I am coming to pick you up in twenty!' she shouted as soon as Shreya took her call.

'Pick up? Where are we going?'

'Shopping! Be ready! I'm coming!'

'Why are you shouting so much? What happened?' Shreya asked.

'The best thing ever. Mom is coming back home. And I need to get something awesome for her!'

'Umm ... are you serious, or is it just that you are in trauma or something?'

'I'm serious. It's the best thing ever. I got my mom back. I have a complete family,' Natasha said excitedly.

'Okay. And how did it happen?' Shreya sounded a little unsure.

'I will tell you when we meet ...'

'You forgave her?'

'Yes, I did. It's not that simple. We need to meet,' Natasha said happily before lowering her voice and saying, 'Please come ...'

'Wow. You do look happy.. .'

'Shut up! Get ready. See you twenty.'

Natasha was still jumping around the room when she heard the bell ring. The maid shouted at her that there was someone to meet her. Natasha didn't know who would come to meet her. She thought it was the courier guy and went for a shower. She lit up some aromatic candles, put in some bath salts and soaked herself in.

She lay back and felt good. The water against her skin gently swayed as she made plans about what she and her mom would do together. They could go to day-long spas together. They could do shopping together. She could tell her about her guys and her mom would ask her to stay away from them. After the long rejuvenating bath, she got ready. There were a few missed calls from Shreya who said she would be a little late.

She went down to the shouts of her maid. The person was still waiting for her. It had been over an hour.

Near the door, she saw him.

Rana.

'Hi Natasha,' he said casually. It was as if they were on the best of terms ... as if nothing bad had ever happened between them. It angered Natasha.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'I came here to apologize. What I did was really horrible. I never should have done that. But I was angry. And it happened.'

'I understand ...'

'I got to know about how it affected your image at your school. And I felt really bad for having done that to you. I am sorry,' he said.

'It's okay,' Natasha said with a smile. She was too happy to remember what Rana's betrayal had done to her. She had forgotten how she tried to kill herself ... And also, the whole forgiving and forgetting thing had started to feel good. She had figured out a long time back that she really did not love Rana. So she did not feel anything at all, seeing him on her doorstep.

'What?' Rana asked.

'I said it's okay. It's fine. I forgive you.'

'I knew you would forgive me.'

'Excuse me?' she asked. He was grinning like an idiot. And she had no idea what was so funny about the whole situation.

'I mean-'

'Actually, never mind. I need to rush now. Catch you later?'

'Are you playing hard to get?' Rana asked, innocently.

Natasha's brow wrinkled. What was with him?

'What are you ... ? Are you okay?' she asked. She was getting irritated. She just wanted to get rid of him quickly and rush to go for shopping with Shreya.

'I know that you love me. And I love you. What I did was bad, but I am sorry about it. I have been meaning to come to you and tell you how sorry I am. I am sorry, my love.'

'My love . . . ?' Natasha mouthed, unable to speak anymore. She was totally and completely dumbstruck.

'Yes, your love,' he smiled and came forward to hug her. She jerked back.

'Stay. Don't you take another step towards me. Leave. Now,' she gritted her teeth and said. She was suddenly furious.

'Don't do this me. I really love you,' Rana said.

Are you like, totally dumb or something?' Natasha shouted. 'You come here, very conveniently assuming that I am all head over heels in love with you, and act like you are my knight in a shining armour? With that apology speech rehearsed ... What did you expect? That I would jump in excitement at the thought of getting back together? With you?'

'Natasha, I said I am sorry-'

'Because if that is so, then all I can say is you've got to be kidding me. After what you did to me, you should be thanking your stars that you are still alive. You disgust me. That's what I feel for you. Not love, you jackass. Now get out of here before I have to throw you out.'

He looked at her gobsmacked. Natasha could make guys shit their pants, and Rana was a living proof of the fact. Exhibit A. He looked at her, confused. For all she knew, he might still have been expecting her to crack up any time, saying that she had been kidding. He waited for a few seconds, like a helpless little rabbit in a tigress' cage. His eyes were wide in fear, before he turned around and stumbled out of the room in haste.

As soon as he was out of the door, Natasha burst out laughing. Yes, the way Rana had assumed everything had pissed her off. But when he was not in front of her anymore, she

simply could not control her laughter at the whole situation. She rushed to Shreya's place, dying to tell her what happened. She wasn't even looking for revenge, but she got hers anyway ... and it was oh so sweet.

That was a story they would laugh at for a long time to come.

Chapter 23

Enemies for Life

The next morning, when she woke up, the euphoria had still not left her. Her mom was coming home. That was all Natasha could think about. Nothing else mattered to her. No matter how much Shreya tried to force her to prepare a little for the quiz, Natasha did not agree. Nothing could touch her. She was in her own cocoon of happiness, separated from the rest of the world.

'Please. I beg you. I've searched some questions and mailed them to you. Just go through them once?' Shreya said.

'No way! You know it will be of no use, don't you? What are the chances that we would be asked any question from all that we read now?' Natasha reasoned.

'Even if one question matches, it will be worth it.'

Are you mad? It will be a total waste! Just like the last two times.'

'Still. Just read it once. Browse through it ... you might remember something, if asked,' Shreya said.

'Oh, please. You know I won't, don't you? Then why are you even trying?'

'Because I can't do this alone. I need you,' Shreya said in a low voice.

'Shit. You just had to blackmail me emotionally,' Natasha sighed. She knew she had lost the battle.

So that's how Natasha started to study. And once she started, it began to feel good. It was impossible not to be excited about something Shreya was so excited about. Once again, Shreya's enthusiasm was contagious. Natasha found herself awake the whole night. She completed the material Shreya had sent her. Then, she turned to Google. She read whatever she found.

In her head, she thought of a million possibilities. Whenever she read something, she imagined being asked about it in the quiz the next day. She would know the answer. In

fact, she would know all the answers. They would totally take it away! And everyone would be so proud of her. Mom would be so proud of her ... Her daydreams had no bounds.

When she finally decided to call it a day, it was already morning. She caught up with an hour's sleep before rushing to school. Her dad offered to drop her. She said yes. She had not broached the topic with her father. She didn't want to. It was all in the past and everyone was over it. She didn't want to bring it up again and ruin everything.

All prepared?' he asked.

'As prepared as I will ever be,' she smiled at him.

All the best, kiddo.'

'Thanks, Dad. And yes, I need some money. I need to get another gift for Mom. We don't have much time till she comes here to stay ...'

He smiled. She knew that he was happy with her decision. She was happy that he was happy. And she was happy otherwise too. She had a mother again!

She hopped out of the car and immediately started looking around for Shreya. When she could not find her anywhere, she tried her phone.

'Where are you? I have been looking for you everywhere,' Natasha said into the phone.

'I'm at home. You're at school? Already?' Shreya asked.

'Yes. What are you still doing at home? Come quickly. I'm waiting for you!'

'But the quiz starts at 1 PM. We will leave from school for IIT at 11 AM. What are you doing at school this early? It's still seven thirty!'

'I came at regular school time. I did not know about the whole schedule. And you were too busy to talk to me,' Natasha said. Shreya had taken the quiz very seriously. She had devoted every waking second preparing for it.

Aww! I'm sorry. I'm leaving home right now. I'll come there as soon as possible, okay?'

Alright.' They hung up.

Great, Natasha thought. She could have easily slept for a couple of hours more. She looked around and spotted Ananya at a distance. She thought of going to her and blackmailing her some more, but she was done playing with her. As the saying goes, you should not play with your food.

She turned away and found herself face to face with Yuvraj. She immediately turned away. She didn't want her day to go downhill. Her mood was too precious to be ruined.

'Natasha!' Yuvraj called out.

'Yes?' she paused and turned towards him, unwillingly.

'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

'I thought you said we had nothing to talk about?'

'Now we do. Will you please just listen?' he asked.

Alright. What is it?'

'What is going on between you and Ananya? What were you talking about that day in the canteen? And that day in the parking lot?'

'She did not tell you? You seriously do not know?' Natasha asked. She was trying to gauge whether Yuvraj was serious. Did Ananya really not tell him? She simply did not think that it could be possible. The video was a big deal. It could have ruined the both of them for life.

'No, I do not know. She is not telling anyone. But it is bothering her. I can tell.'

'Good. That was the intention.'

'But why? What do you have against her? She didn't do anything to you,' he said.

'Oh yes? Then how did it all happen? Why was I suddenly not the Head Girl anymore? Why was I thrown out of the Debating Club? How did the school authorities come to know that I sent some guys to beat you up?'

'Ananya did not do all that! None of it was her plan. In fact, she did not even know

about it until later.'

'Then whose plan was it?' Natasha asked.

'I cannot tell you that. All I can tell you is that Ananya had nothing to do with it.'

'Not good enough. Tell me who was behind it.'

'I was. It was all my plan, okay?' Yuvraj said.

'Not okay. I know you are lying. And I need the truth.'

'It was not my plan, but I was also involved in it. I cannot tell you whose it was. He is a friend. I cannot betray-'

'Was it Rana?' Natasha cut him off midway. 'It was Rana, wasn't it?'

Yuvraj hesitated for a brief second. 'I cannot tell you . .

'I knew it. I knew it. When I first asked him to get you beaten up, he was totally against it, but suddenly, he started to love the idea.'

'He just wanted to see if getting me beaten up was the reason why you were with him,' Yuvraj explained.

'So he played his silly game with me? To test me whether I loved him or was using him.'

'Yes.'

'That bastard,' Natasha said and smiled. She almost felt sorry for Rana. She was glad now about what happened the day before when she humiliated Rana. He deserved every bit of it.

'Natasha ... back to my question-what is bothering Ananya? Can you please tell me?'

'I told her about the video I have of the two of you, snogging in that dark, dingy aisle of the library. And I might have threatened to make it public. That's all,' Natasha said and put on an innocent face.

'What? What are you talking about? Where did you get that video from?'

'I used to run this school remember. I can still get things when I want.'

'But ... but why? Why would you want to do that? I told you! Ananya never did anything bad to you. Why do that to her, then?' Yuvraj reasoned.

'I don't know ... maybe because it's fun to do that?'

'Fun? You are ruining her life. You call that fun?'

,TO me, it is the most fun thing ever,' Natasha said. 'Now, if you will excuse me, I have a quiz to prepare for. The quiz that you and your precious Ananya could not make it into.'

And then, she left.



'Stop studying now! That's enough,' Natasha told Shreya.

'What if this one question is asked?'

'It won't be. You are getting obsessed with this!'

'You are too. It's just that you don't want to show how much winning this means to you,' Shreya said with a knowing smile.

'Whatever. Blab.'

'Is the team here yet?' Ms Juneja asked no one in particular and looked around.

'Yes, ma'am. We are here,' Shreya got up and said. 'Just Vicky ...'

'Again?' Natasha mouthed, as they looked around.

'Well, call him quick. We need to leave. I will be accompanying you there, along with a few more staff members,' Ms Juneja informed.

'I am not calling him this time,' Natasha said when they moved away from Ms Juneja.

'Never mind, I will,' Shreya said, her phone to her ears.

Two minutes later, they were all set to go ... except Mr Chandra, a teacher who was supposed to be accompanying them as well. Natasha had a sudden thought.

'I'll be back,' she whispered to Shreya.

'Where are you going?' Shreya hissed back.

'Just a minute. I will be back,' Natasha said and slipped away discreetly. She knew Shreya would cover for her. She knew they probably did not have much time to spare, but she simply could not go without doing what she had to do.

She went to the classroom of the twelfth grade, section D. Ananya's section. 'Excuse me, sir?' she said, standing at the door.

'What is it?' Mr Sharma asked. Just as her luck would have it, the strictest teacher in school had to be there, at that exact time.

'Sir, Ms Juneja is calling Ananya Roy,' she lied smoothly. She knew 'sir, I need to talk to Ananya' would not have worked.

Ananya Roy!' Mr Sharma called, before turning back to Natasha. 'And from the next time, I will appreciate not being disturbed during my lectures. Maths is important too.'

God! This man is so insecure about the subject he teaches! Natasha thought and hid a smile. Ananya came out.

'Hey!' Natasha said.

'Hi,' Ananya replied dryly. 'Where will I find Ms Juneja?'

'That doesn't matter. She was not calling you. I wanted to talk to you.'

'To me? About what?'

'The video,' Natasha said shortly.

'What about it?'

'I think I am not going to leak it, after all.'

'What?' Ananya looked visibly shocked.

'You got it right. Crazy, eh? But you would be amazed to know-I do have a heart. Who would have thought?' Natasha laughed.

Ananya's smile was from ear to ear. 'Thank you so much! You cannot believe how stressed I was about it. I was so. . .' she paused. She probably felt what Natasha was feeling. Strange. It was strange. To laugh with your sworn enemy, and to talk to her casually ... it was really weird. Natasha recovered quickly.

'Yeah. Whatever. As if I am interested in your sob story. I decided not to go through my threat and I told you. Now buzz off before I change my mind,' she said.

'Okay. Thank you ...'

'Save it. We are still enemies. Always have been. Always will be.' With that, she left. She felt good about it. And she felt good about herself.

She could not leave for the quiz, knowing that Yuvraj and Ananya would be worried about the video and her threat. Yuvraj had told her that Ananya had nothing to do with her downfall. She believed him. He did not lie; he was not that kind of a person.

Knowing that, Natasha saw no reason in making Ananya's life hell. In fact, even when she hadn't known the full facts, , she had already decided not to go through with her threats. She had simply decided not to. The love that Yuvraj and Ananya shared stopped her. She remembered the look on Ananya's face a few days ago. And she remembered the look on Yuvarj's face that morning. And seeing that, she knew what true love was. She would have drawn no pleasure in ruining their lives. But more than that, she couldn't have ruined Ananya's life like she had ruined Shreya's.

They were all the same. Little girls with broken hearts and issues they couldn't talk with other people. Natasha had hers too. There was a Shreya and an Ananya in her too. They were different, but they were also all the same in some way. She realized that life would be a lot easier if everyone was not so hell-bent on being a bitch.

Chapter 24

The Final Round

She did not dare to even look at the audience. If the campus of IIT Delhi was not intimidating enough, the audience in the auditorium almost made them wet their pants. Sitting there on the stage, Natasha realized why people were dying to be in their place. Although, she had to agree, being in their place was not that easy. The crowd was huge, and it made butterflies flutter in her stomach.

'I told you it was a big deal,' Shreya whispered.

'I do realize now. Oh darn. What if we cannot answer anything? Shit. Shit. Shit. Why did I not prepare properly?' Natasha fretted. It was hard not to panic. The participants from the other schools looked like nerds. Which was a bad thing. Natasha had been so preoccupied with so many things happening in her life, that somehow, the quiz had taken the last slot on her priority list. How she regretted that! She wanted to win. Very, very badly. She crossed her fingers and whispered best of luck to Shreya and Vicky.

And then, it began.

They were stumped. They had no clue what the standard of questions would be. But they had not expected it to be that high. They were proven wrong. It was no regular quiz. The first two rounds seemed like a joke in comparison to what they were facing here. They were not prepared for it. They had no idea what hit them.

The rules were totally different. To start with, there were no multiple choice questions. Zero. All questions had answers of either one word, or a sentence. Also, there was negative scoring in each round. Some rounds were time bound. And they had to be quick, too-there was a round of questions in which the team that pressed the buzzer first could answer. When the rules were announced, Natasha, Shreya and Vicky looked at each other in sheer terror. What happened to the good old one-out-of-four multiple choice questions?

Their beginning was exceptionally poor. According to the rules, there were supposed to be three rounds. At the end of each round, the team scoring the least points would be eliminated. The team that made it to the end won.

In the first round, they came very close to being the lowest scoring team. It was a tie between The Presidency Convent and DPS R K Puram. They were going to be asked one question each, to settle the deciding score. The first question was to DPS. They answered it correctly.

`Shit,' Natasha said.

`Crap,' Shreya said.

Getting eliminated in the first round itself, standing at the fourth position out of four ... now that was not too pleasant a thought. They could imagine the kind of jibes they would get to hear at school if that ever happened. They crossed their fingers. Their heartbeats quickened. The question was asked.

'And the tie-breaking question, to The Presidency Convent is-ZETA stands for?'

'Zero Energy Thermonuclear Assembly,' Vicky replied at record speed. Natasha and Shreya turned to stare at him. 'What? I read about it just this morning,' he said.

'Zero Energy Thermonuclear Assembly is the correct answer. Seems like we need to have another tie-breaker round. This time, we have a different rule-one question will be asked and the team that presses the buzzer first gets to answer. Also, you have to come up with the correct answer within three seconds of pressing the buzzer. Are you ready?' the anchor asked.

'Yes,' both the teams replied.

Alright. So your question is-the law of segregation was propounded by?'

Shreya pressed the buzzer. 'Mendel,' she said calmly into the microphone. And that's how DPS R K Puram got eliminated in the first round. After the First round, The Presidency Convent stood at 15 points, Modern School at 20 points and The Bishop Boys' School at 25 points.

Natasha sighed in relief. 'What the hell is this law of segregation thing, anyway?' she asked.

'It's from biology. It's a good thing I studied that for that first round back at school. Thank God,' Shreya replied.

'At least we won't be last,' Natasha and Vicky echoed. There was an awkward pause, after which, they both turned away.

The second round had very simple rules. Each of the teams would be asked five questions. Correct answers got them 10 points. Incorrect answers lost them 5 points. If the team failed to answer that question, it was passed to the next team, for 5 points.

And in that round, The Presidency Convent stole the show. They passed one question and answered the other four correctly. Plus, they answered one bonus question correctly, too. By the end of second round, they were sitting comfortably at 60 points. Whereas, by answering three questions correctly and passing the other two, Modern School was at 50 points by the end of the second round. The Bishop Boys' answered three questions and two bonus questions correctly, and passed the other two to stand at 65 points. They got a bit lucky with both the questions Modern School passed. Otherwise there was no match to the way the Presidency Convent performed.

After Modern School got eliminated in the second round, there came the bonus round. Heartbeats were rising. There was a lot at stake. Natasha exchanged looks with Shreya and Vicky. 'We have to do this,' she said. 'This is our chance to outdo Bishop. We cannot let them have an upper hand when we enter the final round.'

'I know,' Shreya whispered back. She was visibly nervous.

Vicky nodded.

The rules were announced. 'This round-the bonus round-does not have negative scoring. A question will be asked to both teams and they have to write down their answers in the cards that are placed on their table. Five questions will be asked, and every correct answer adds 5 points to the score. All the best! Now, shall we start?'

Both teams murmured their approval.

The questions were asked one by one and they wrote down their answers on the cards. When the cards were collected, Natasha's heart gave a flip. This was one round in which they had no idea how the other team did ... or if their own answers were correct. Her palms felt cold and she gave a slight shiver. It was announced.

'The result of this round is quite surprising,' the anchor said. 'Both the teams have performed a little inferior to their own standards. In the bonus round, The Bishop Boys'

School got only two answers correct. That is-10 bonus points!

Natasha held her breath. 10 points. That meant Bishop was at 75. They needed to have gotten three answers correct to match their score. But then, didn't the anchor say that both their performances were poor? What did poor mean? Getting how many answers wrong? She wondered.

Three, she got to know. 'The Presidency Convent also got just two answers correct. 10 points! The total score, at the end of the bonus round is-The Bishop Boys' School leads at 75, while The Presidency Convent stands at 70 points,' the anchor announced.

Darn. Bishop had a slight upper hand in the final round. 5 points could turn out to be pretty important in the last round of the quiz. The competition was tough. Natasha was scared, but she was excited too. There was a much needed short break before the final round. Natasha sipped her glass of water. They did not leave their seats. Neither did they talk. The environment was getting thick with anticipation. Shreya looked tenser than ever. Even Vicky looked a bit worn out.

The quiz resumed. They sent a silent prayer to the heavens and wished each other luck. Natasha shivered a little and could feel Shreya shiver right next to her, too. The rules were announced.

'In the final round, both the teams will be five asked questions. Again, there is no negative scoring and every correct answer adds ten points to the score.'

The round started with the first question to The Presidency Convent. After three questions each, they stood at 90 points. And the Bishop at 105.

Yes, they totally screwed up. They answered two questions correctly and The Bishop Boys' answered all three of them right. So that meant, in order to win, The Presidency had to answer both the remaining questions correctly and The Bishop Boys' had to get both the questions wrong. Probability was not in their favour.

Their fourth question was asked. 'The fear of books is called?'

'I know this,' Shreya whispered. 'I know this ...'

Vicky looked blank.

Natasha thought hard and fast. She knew she had read it. She just did not remember what the answer was. It was all very confusing. But she remembered that the word begun with the letter B and ended with phobia. But she was not sure. 'Bit ... biliophobia?' she asked Shreya softly.

'No. Bibliophobia,' Shreya looked up and said. 'Right? It's bibliophobia?'

'Yes! That's it,' Natasha cheered. 'It's bibliophobia,' she said into the microphone.

'And that's the correct answer. The Presidency is now at 100 points. The Bishop is at 105. Their fourth question is-the fear of crowds is?'

There was a brief discussion, after which they answered, 'Clinophobia.'

The anchor said, 'No! Clinophobia is the wrong answer. The right answer is oochlophobia. With that, the score remains unchanged. The Presidency stands at 100 points. The Bishop is at 105.'

It was their last question. The deciding question. They had to get it right in any case. And they had to pray that The Bishop got it wrong. The anticipation was killing Natasha.

The fifth question was asked. 'The German physicist who first demonstrated the existence of radio waves was?'

'Hertz!' Natasha replied instantly. She felt almost giddy with happiness. She had got it right! She had got the final question right! What just happened? Such an easy question?

'Full name?' the anchor asked. Not that easy.

Darn. She tried to remember what it was but knew that she would not be able to. She remembered reading about the demonstration of radio waves somewhere. And she remembered reading Hertz there. Her mind had discarded the name and just remembered the surname. It was easy to remember. She looked at the other two helplessly.

Shreya shook her head. Natasha's heart dropped. That means they lost? just like that?

'Henry?' Vicky murmured. 'Or ... Henrich?'

The girls shook their heads.

'Choose one. Let's give it a try, at least,' Vicky said.

They shook their heads again.

'It's Henr . . . it's Henrich Hertz,' he said. Natasha could see his fingers crossed under the table. Same as hers.

The anchor said, 'And Henrich Hertz . . . is the . . . right answer! The Presidency is at 110 points now, just 5 points ahead of The Bishop. The competition is stiff. It all boils down to the last question. If The Bishop gets this last question correct, they win, and if not, The Presidency does.'

Natasha literally stopped breathing this time. She stopped listening. She stopped seeing. Speaking was out of question. Her mind was buzzing. One question. Last question. Deciding question. She breathed heavily, as if she had just run a marathon. She blinked repeatedly to clear her vision. She could see the anchor ask the question. She did not hear it She just stared at the anchor. She was waiting for a 'and that's the wrong answer.' She bit her lip.

'Michael Faraday,' she heard someone from The Bishop answer.

'And... Michael Faraday...' the anchor paused dramatically. 'Michael Faraday... IS THE RIGHT ANSWER! With that, The Bishop Boys' School wins.'

And Natasha stopped listening to anything at all after that.

They had lost.

Epilogue

It was not as bad as Natasha had first thought it would be. Once the initial pain subsided, it was easy to take. The transition took only about ... thirty minutes to happen! When the shock of losing dwindled, they realised how amazing an achievement being first runners-up was. It was nothing in comparison to actually winning the thing, but it wasn't too bad either. They had put up a mighty good fight, right up to the last answer. And in turn, people had applauded their effort. It was a good feeling. Nobody had expected them to come this far.

Another good thing was-the guys from The Bishop Boys' School had come to shake hands with them. The boys at The Bishop had always been famous for being ten on-ten. And the ones that had come up to them were especially cute. They were Facebook friends the next day. Natasha told herself that she would be careful about the guys she chose now. She would talk to her mom and take her advice. While Shreya and Natasha talked to the boys from The Bishop Boys', Vicky sulked in the corner. He told them later that they shouldn't have talked to them. He was jealous. Shreya later told Natasha that Vicky liked her a little. Natasha brushed the thought away.

What they had feared was the reaction of people at their own school. They were sure to get some pretty ugly jibes thrown at them. They were officially losers. But they were in for a surprise. No such thing happened! The Presidency Convent received them proudly. Apparently, everybody knew about the tough fight they had put up.

Natasha finally got her respect back. When she walked the corridors of The Presidency now, people did not pass comments on her character. Just about her long legs! It was just like before. Only ... Natasha did not care about what they thought anymore. They could abuse her character, or they could drool over her legs, it did not matter to her either way. They meant nothing to her.

The only people that meant anything to her were with her. And that was enough for her. And oh! Her mom shifted back to their place two days after the quiz. Natasha jumped around in happiness for the next whole week. She was still giddy. She had a mother again! She had a family again! That was a reason to celebrate.

It was just that she did not have time to celebrate.

'Where are you? I'm waiting for you!' Shreya said on the phone.

'I'm just getting there. Five minutes,' Natasha replied. When in reality, she was sitting on the couch with her legs up on the table.

'Be here in five or else I will kill you.'

The only time when Shreya threatened, was to make Natasha study. Just like while preparing for the quiz, Shreya kept forcing Natasha to study. Meanwhile, Natasha tried to stay as far away from her books till the time she could afford to. Right then, she could not. Their half-yearly exams started the next day. And she did not know a word about the subject. Chemistry.

'Okay. Honestly now-I'm still at home. I'll be there in half an hour. Promise,' she said and hung up before Shreya got a chance to shout at her again. 'And Vicky insisted. He wants to study with us. I told you he likes you. Be kind to him.'

Shreya kept the phone down before Natasha could react. Shreya was still on a mission to turn Natasha into a good person. Natasha was trying her best to reject the change. But she knew it was a lost battle. Natasha had a simple formula. Don't make new enemies. But maintain the old ones. She was still looking for a way to destroy Ananya! But if she kept letting Shreya influence her, she was sure she would turn into a good girl. The thought terrorized her nights' sleep.

Her only consolation was-she was making a few changes in Shreya, too. Like for example-Shreya had moved on from saying crap to saying shit.

That's progress.

... I Love you Rachu ...

Dear Frnds pls spread this msg until its reach to my rachu

I think see knows my name

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